

THE CHARGER CHRONICLES
CHARGER THE SOLDIER



Beginning a journey through time and space...

BOOK 1

CHARGER the SOLDIER

(Charger Chronicles - Book 1)

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Publisher: Felinity Press

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A heartfelt thank you to all those people who helped me to make this novel better: Leanne Taylor, Anna Becker, Laura Langston, Phil Sutton, and most of all, my science guy.

We live in a society exquisitely dependent on science and technology, in which hardly anyone knows anything about science and technology.

Carl Sagan (1934 - 1996)

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Chapter 1 Dart speaks to Reader

My name is Dart. I'm an average kind of guy, who has led an average life, with two exceptions. I am more than a thousand years old, as perhaps you can guess from my long gray hair and beard.

And I am the last man to walk the face of this once great planet Earth.

You sit there, Reader, hearing my story, and you ask what it's like to live a thousand years. I can only speak for myself because I'm not exactly average anymore, and not entirely human either. When I was born, the normal life span of a human was just barely one hundred and thirty years. Yes, I can see you're surprised.

Why am I the last man on Earth? Obviously, you have many questions. And I am just the man to give you the answers, which Charger has delegated me to do.

You want to know why I wear a tall, black pointed hat and a robe embroidered with planets? Because, back about five hundred years ago when everybody decided to role-play, I chose to be a wizard.

No, the people on Ceres voted to become Dwarves and those on Mars to become Elves. Earthers went steampunk and the population of New Eden became mostly Techno-creeps. Besides, I am tall, thin, bony, and a little hunched, so a wizard's costume suited me better than anything else popular at the time.

Reader, my eyes are black and piercing, not black and spooky! You must stop teasing and pay attention.

Yes, of course I am going to explain everything. As a matter of fact, I must explain everything, for you alone will carry the entire history of humanity into the future.

Why you alone? Because in just a few days the biggest and most powerful enemies that humans have ever faced will be here, bent on destroying Earth. That's why you must concentrate on what I have to teach you.

No, Charger will save you.

How long is the story? Well, it starts in 65,000,000 BCE and will end sometime this week, the middle of August, in 4800 CE.

Don't sigh, Reader. The story is long in years, but not in the telling. I'll leave out all the boring bits. And yes, I do know that when humanity began, perhaps a million years ago, we were very primitive. But there were some mighty interesting and important events that happened much further back, which determined how we turned out and who we ended up fighting for our survival.

Is Charger the hero?

Well, I wouldn't call Charger a hero, though perhaps I should since he's my father. He began life, in the twenty-first century, as one of the saviors of Earth but eventually became a despised monster.

How can I call my father a monster?

Listen, Reader, he was reviled by all. To call him malevolent or evil is to accord him some high purpose in life, but nothing could be further from the truth. He became a brute who felt rage but never pity, and seemed utterly bereft of the goodness and decency possessed by the kind young man from whom he was created.

Do I hate him?

Sometimes. But then I remember that before he became Charger R/T, he was just Charger,

and before that, Henry, a young man who willingly gave up everything but life itself to ensure the survival of humanity.

He was a hated but necessary blackness thrust upon our very existence. No shadowy figure in the darkness waiting to strike the unsuspecting, no grand speechmaker fooling listeners with sugary words, his willingness to kill never abated. And his disdain for humanity was absolute. A paradox: humans meant nothing and yet everything to this frantic madness known as Charger.

But, in humanity's desperate hours, in every fight for our very right to exist, we needed a hero.

What we delivered to ourselves instead, created by our own hands, was the unacknowledged monster found in every last one of us, in the deepest recesses of our minds. The monster who denies incestuous desires, then fulfills them; the false friend who will manipulate to gain power; the molester of innocents; the preacher of divine behavior who indulges in whoring and theft. In a desperate bid for survival, our fear of death drove us to manifest in living flesh that which we all claim to despise.

I will describe to you, Reader, a great and terrible time on planet Earth. The story will explain to what lengths we were driven, what moralities we rejected, what disgust we willingly embraced. It will explain who Charger is, and what we became because of him.

What justifications can I give you for the atrocities that humanity committed?

None.

This is the story of Charger and of humanity. I must leave it to you to judge. When the story is done, that will be your task.

Chapter 2 Blix and Ook

During the reign of dinosaurs on Earth around sixty-five million years BCE, the Grays, alien beings of an empire called Betelle, were a great and powerful race. They plied the distances in space as easily as humans back in the twenty-first century drove across the country. The Betelle Realm was so vast they needed entire solar systems to accommodate their population. And, not satisfied with simply finding new worlds to live on, these beings towed fertile planets into orbit around suns which were perfect to light and heat their settlements.

The citizens of Betelle shared many of the paths that humanity took as they evolved. Much like humans, they evolved from simple to complex, warred against neighbors, and destroyed civilizations. Their life spans were triple those of the healthiest humans and their 'year' measured three of ours. They grew crops and kept animals. Most important, they developed incredibly advanced and complex technology, though this still led to the destruction and rebuilding of cultures countless times.

The Grays also resembled us in basic body form. However, they were shorter, around four feet, and hairless, with dark gray, leathery skin. Their large heads had eyes with black pupils in gray irises. Long arms with many-jointed fingers helped them to manipulate every sort of tool. As to character, they resembled the more aggressive of our species in being acquisitive and power-hungry.

The Grays sent explorers out into the blackness of space to find treasure and new information to add to their store of knowledge and Earth was one of their many stops. They found it to be a simple but rich place during the time of the dinosaurs. None of the existing creatures had noticeable intellect or other benefits to offer, so they decided to expunge the planet's animal forms and plunder its resources. Eventually they would tow the planet itself to a solar system already under construction.

But fate, as it often does, intervened.

As the Grays left the planet behind, they fired a light beam that altered the path of a large asteroid, which fell on what was later known as the Yucatan peninsula. The Grays returned a hundred thousand years later, when the atmosphere and climate had returned to normal for that particular time, and found that the extinction event had been a success.

That is, except for a small group of survivors on an isolated southern continent. One curious Betellian decided to experiment on them. These Troodon were small dinosaurs, up to eight feet long, three to four feet tall, and around a hundred and ten pounds. Their brains were, relative to their body mass, six times larger than any other dinosaur, and they had semi-manipulatable fingers and binocular vision. The Betellian succeeded in breeding them to produce fingers, better brains, and vision, and called them Dinosauroids. It seemed appropriate that these animals should be given the opportunity to use their primitive intelligence in service to the beings of Betelle.

This proved to be disastrous.

Never before had the Betellians encountered such devious and determined creatures. They became far more intelligent than expected and rebelled against servitude time after time. Finally, the experiment was deemed too hazardous to continue, and attempts were made to kill the project.

The Dinosauroids had other ideas. The Betellians brought more of their own kind to Earth to contain the burgeoning population but, though they killed many Dinosauroids, they were unable

to eliminate them entirely. The Betellian who had created the Dinosauroids admired the tenacity of the little mischief-makers and decided they had earned the right to exist. This Betellian searched the Grays' archives of knowledge and found what was called a 'black' project, deemed too controversial to continue and thus long forgotten.

The time-lock device seemed the perfect solution. The creator of the Dinosauroids decided to make several of these devices and use one to lock away the creatures, hoping that time would tame the wondrous children it had created.

The problem-solver was doomed to fail. Before he could use his devices, a migrating flock of birds, pushed off course by strong winds and carrying a new virus, landed on the continent. The virus infected all the Dinosauroids but killed only the weak. Thereafter, the survivors carried the virus in natural body oils exuded by their fine, delicate scales. When dried, some of the oils stuck to the scales but most floated freely in the air. Inhaled by the Grays, these caused a fatal viral outbreak impossible to stem.

Most of the Betellians fled back to their various planets, thus infecting and destroying the great civilization of Betelle. The few scattered survivors sought refuge in a different layer of time via the time-lock. They emerged, after what seemed to be only a few hundred years, to discover that the time-lock processed time at a different rate than normal space. Sixty-three million years of ordinary time had passed. Now these few, even with their advanced technology, faced a daunting task.

The Grays embarked on a cloning program to recreate their enormous lost population and forgot the incident on Earth. But one day, primitive humans chanced on an abandoned Betelle device and accidentally turned it on, sending a signal out into the cosmos. The new clones of the Betelle empire relearned the old history of Earth, realized the planet still had valuable resources, and determined to put an end to the viral scourge. They sent fifteen of their mightiest warships to Earth. However, when they arrived in this distant corner of space, they were astonished to find, not Dinosauroids, but creatures who looked something like them.

However, these creatures had no tails. They sported body hair instead of scaly hides. They also appeared to have more intelligence than the Dinosauroids. Once again, a curious Betellian decided to experiment.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Yes, Reader, you're now hearing what happened about two million years ago. I got through sixty-three million years in almost no time, didn't I?

Were these new creatures humans? We would probably call them apes, but they were certainly the ancestors of modern humans.

No, the Dinosauroids didn't disappear. Remember, they were thriving when the Grays escaped into a different timeline. They will appear again later in the story. I'm afraid the Grays appear again, as well. Too many times.

You want to know what it's like to be experimented on, to have your DNA altered? Blix will explain.



My eyes open. There is pain, and I cannot move. An odor strikes my senses; it is sharp and

rancid. My confusion grows and panic sets in. I do not know where I am. Whatever is holding me down is painful and keeps me from looking around. I squint as a bright light hovers above me and shines into my watering eyes.

I come to understand that I do not know who I am, or what I am. A sound emanates from somewhere near; it sounds like a scream. Then I realize the scream is coming from me, but I do not know how I am doing it.

I can see no trees and this place is cold and damp. I remember the cave of my father that I live in, the images of the hunt on the walls. There is no smell of fire here and that makes me afraid. There are more sounds, like birds chirping, but I cannot see where they come from. Then more pain comes. I twist and try to escape but am held fast and I cry out. The sound I make before everything goes away is frightening and unfamiliar.

My eyes open. The feel of something wet on my face causes me to flinch. There are eyes above me, looking at me. I am afraid of them. Something sharp and threatening comes into view and the wetness on my face begins to sting. I cry out against the pain, hoping it will stop. Then a burning, numbing pain enters me, causing my body to twist and heave. Unable to move, I try to close my eyes. I cannot. The sharp thing is in my eye and makes me scream.

Why is this happening? What is going on? Then the thought of the hunt gives me a moment of peace. I feel the stone in my hand, cold and hard, and I wait for the beast to get close. We all yell and several of us attack the beast and hit it till it stops moving. My stomach wrenches; soon I will eat. Then the thought is gone, and the eyes return to hang in front of my face. The face with the eyes is becoming clear and it is unfamiliar. I have never seen this face before, and it makes me shake.

My eyes open. It is dark. I hear familiar sounds. They are sounds from the others, the others from the hunt. One sound I know is family. I call out but cannot see the face that goes with that voice. This dark has no round light that hangs above in the sky, the light that returns when the bright sky fire goes away. We will not hunt without the round light; the beasts can smell us and hear us even when they can't see us.

A face I know passes my eyes. I call out but it does not stop. I try again to move but my body is held fast, and this angers me. I try to fight, to move and strike out. My hands feel around, touching smooth cold, then the warm flesh of my legs. The eyes of pain return and something good nears my nose, smelling like food. I try to bite it. It is food and I am relieved; my hunger makes me eat till the food stops. I am still hungry and make the sound to let the eyes of pain know. But the eyes are gone and then I sleep.

My eyes open. A face I know is there. The smell is familiar, for I have known this face many seasons. The look from the face is different. It is studying me, touching me, poking me. I shove the face away from me, then realize I can move. All around me is cave, the rocks cold and hard, flat, and smooth, strangely even. There is no fire. There are no images; the cave is not that of my father. It is different. I do not understand this cave and it frightens me. More faces and sounds, sounds that are unfamiliar yet known.

One face I know asks if I hurt. I say I do, but do not know how I said that. Other faces are making sounds and I seem to understand them, but I am confused, so I just sit and listen. The bird chirps return, but that sound is from all around me. I look about to find the birds and pain fills my back. I have been hit, or stung, like happened once before when I was young. It grows dark.

My eyes open. Afraid of what might happen, I quickly look for shelter. I need a rock, and my hands reach out, searching. The cave is bright, and I find a good rock. It is hard and I hold it

near my chest. I will strike the first eyes I see. An old one from the family walks toward me. I growl and lash out. The old one says something I seem to understand but I refuse to listen. I continue to threaten; I will strike the old one if he gets too close. He backs away and I feel safe and powerful. This is a good rock. I sit until the cave gets dark, and I watch the others and wonder what is happening. No one walks toward me in the light of the cave, but in the dark, one might try. I sit holding my rock, waiting for a fight until I am no more.

My eyes open. It is the same cave, the same faces. They have food and I am hungry. I rush them and they move for safety. With the food, I run back to the safe spot. I growl at faces who walk up to me, and I eat the food quickly. The food is strange. It is not beast, and not from trees. I finish all the food and look for more, but there is none. I sit for a long time, and I am at peace. My eyes close.

My eyes open. There is much pain, the other faces are hitting me. They have rocks and the pain is great. I must flee. I move away from the hitting faces with the rocks and run toward a corner of the cave, but they pursue me and continue hitting. I growl and threaten, but they have no fear of me, and the pain grows. I fall and the faces hit me until it grows dark.

My eyes open. The cave has no light. I do not know if it is day or night. The pain returns but it is less. I try to move and find my leg will not work. I try to walk but fall down. There are no rocks near me, and I fear the faces will return to hit me again. I see a faint light and I crawl toward it. I find myself outside the cave, and I know it is near morning because the sky fire is threatening from behind the mountains.

I think, what is sky, why do I now know this? I see my hands for the first time; they are mine, which I did not know before, but now I do. They are good hands, strong hands, I can make many rocks move with these hands and use them to kill beasts. My hands have made fire. The others in the group like it when I make fire and they make pleasing sounds to me. The round fire in the sky hurts my eyes but I feel safe and warm, and I sleep for a time under a tree.

My eyes open. The ugly faces with big eyes have caught me. I struggle to get free and make the sounds that frighten, but they do not go away. I am brought back to the cave and the family. The evil eyes release me, and I return to the corner in the cave. I sit and ponder the word evil. How do I know this word? Where did it come from? I sit watching for a long time, then a family face is returned to the cave by the evil-eyed ones. The family face shows much pain and cries. I understand pain and crying, but do not know how.

There is a new light in the cave, and I approach it, but when I look at the light, I see another face. I see another cave through this light and when I look around this new cave, the same face returns to block my view. I make the sounds of strength. The face in the light makes a strong face but has no sounds. I reach out my hand to touch the light and the other face does the same. Our hands touch, but the other's hand is cold. I retreat to a far corner and sleep.

My eyes open. I decide to return to the light of the other cave. When I look inside, the other face returns. I see that it copies me. I raise a hand and the other face does the same; I move my hand and the other face does the same. I show my tongue and the other face does the same, but when I touch my face, it touches its face.

I think the face is mine! It has the same color hair and the same hands, and when a family member walks past, they are also in the other cave. I am surer now that this face I see is my face, and I decide to explore it. I call a family member to come see, and I show this female her face. I stop and wonder, how do I know that word, how do I know she is called a female? I spend much time looking at her and she stops to look at me; we are different. The sharp sting in my back returns and so does the pain, then all goes dark.

I am on a cold table, the table is flat, and I know what these names mean. The same evil eyes with the gray-colored skin return to my eyes and use small metal tools to cut into my head. I am bound and cannot fight, which angers me, and I shout out. I now understand that these evil gray things only cause pain when nearby and, at the first chance, I will run from this place. Pictures start flashing in my head. I do not understand them, and do not know how they are possible.

It is a mirror. I now know the object in the cave is a mirror. I try to say the word 'mirror' which is in my head but there is something choking me, something is covering my mouth and I start to panic. I cannot breathe and I fight for air. The evil gray face reappears and touches me with a metal tool. The pain is great, then I black out.

It has been much time. I know this because many members of my family have been brought into this room and have been cut with those sharp tools. We talk to each other with our new words, and we ask if anyone understands what is going on, but we are all lost.

There is one evil Gray that talks to me. It tells me I have a name and it calls me Blix. I do not understand all that this Gray says, but I try. Sometimes it will bring me from the cave into a room to show me pictures. It asks me many times to name what is in the pictures. I do not like these things called 'clothes.' They are tight around my neck. The Gray asks me again to name the pictures. "Rock, tree, girl, fire circle," I say. The Gray is angry and hits me, and tells me the sun is never called the 'fire circle.'

"I do not like this talk," I say to the small gray thing. It says I must try, but I am unsure how it makes its words and how I can hear them.

I find myself back inside the cave with family, and notice for the first time that the entrance to the cave is a door of bars that prevents us from leaving. This I now realize, and I feel trapped. "We must escape," I say to the small female.

She agrees and asks me, "Do you have a plan?"

I must think for some time, unsure of what 'plan' means. Then I realize its meaning and reply, "I will find a plan soon. We will plan to escape."

She agrees and tells the others. They all like 'a plan' and we decide to plan together. The pain in my head is growing less each day and I begin to feel like I understand why my head hurts. It is because the Grays are putting into my head many words I never had before, and they all mean something.

I have begun to understand days. We are awakened each day and given a task to complete. If we complete the task right, we eat; if wrong, we are punished. We must work together to complete the tasks the Grays give us, and every day the tasks grow more difficult.

The small female is called Reko, and the old man is Ook. They work with me, and we try hard to get the tasks right so that we and the others can eat. I am understanding more each day and it feels like my head makes things easier. I think it tells my hands how to take care of the work. The rocks I once held now seem primitive in some way. I have stolen some metal objects. Reko, Ook and I are making a weapon.

Day fifty-six. Some time ago, the Grays showed me how to draw the words I have learned and gave me very thin bark to practice on. I have started writing a diary of events. This will help us determine the pattern these Grays use. We hope to exploit this pattern, which may be their weakness. We have discovered, in our travels to different parts of this complex, that there are other cells with barred doors. Reko observed that members in these prisons are at varying stages of development, and that some members are not progressing as rapidly. They are therefore subjected to much torture and violence, so we have doubled our efforts to escape.

Ook has begun to explore the lower areas of this complex by using labor duties, such as

cleaning, as a ruse to find a passage out. I have developed a simple but effective weapon out of the metal instruments we have stolen. Through a series of gears and spinning shafts, I can accelerate a bolt of sharpened steel to travel at great speed. It is designed to start traveling through the air slowly at first, then increase in velocity, and should easily penetrate the repulse field these Grays use as a shield.

Day one hundred and eight. We are ready to attempt our escape. At daybreak, when the single Gray always enters our cell, I will launch the projectile. This will kill the Gray and give us access to its control unit. With that, we can take the path Ook has discovered to a place of safety. This will be the last entry in this journal.

"Reko, take point, and when the Gray enters, start the distraction," I say firmly. We have been planning this for days, and I feel confident that all aspects of this plan have been considered. The Gray starts fumbling at the cell door, releasing the locks so it can enter.

We are surprised. Two Grays enter the room, where it is normal for only one to enter. I nod to Ook. He knows what to do because we prepared for this possibility. Without warning, Reko throws a large object towards me, just missing my head, and begins to yell at me. The first Gray sees this conflict and moves toward Reko to intervene. This is when Ook begins to use violent behaviors to distract the second Gray.

With both Grays occupied and paying no attention to me, I reach into the cavity we had created in the wall to hide the weapon and, with a quick click, the bolt is fired. I yell "Now!"

As the first Gray falls to the floor, hit by the sharpened steel, Reko and Ook both attack the second Gray. This gives me just enough time to reload and fire the second bolt which hits the target perfectly and drops the second Gray to the floor.

"We have little time, we must go now," Ook shouts.

"Leave it!" Ook shouts again as I bend over the first Gray but I stop long enough to remove the control device the Grays use for their repulse field. Reko gathers up our gear and the three of us rush from the cave toward Ook's escape route. As we run down the halls, we unlock the other cave doors, releasing all of us from the Grays' captivity.



I said to Ook as we gathered wood for a small evening fire, "I saw two more tribes captured by the Grays' flying machines the other day. If we don't leave here soon, they will find us again, too." It's been almost two hundred days since we and the other human captives escaped the Grays' complex. Most of us are surviving hidden in the hills and deep in the forests.

"I agree, Blix. We will leave tomorrow morning," responded Ook as he stood holding an armful of gathered wood. "I think I have managed to find a location where the Grays will not follow us."

The Gray aliens had a preference for us, the species *Homo erectus*, and Ook had guessed that hiding among the small groups of ancient *Homo habilis* still clinging to life in our changing world would afford a good deal of safety. Not only were we *Homo erectus*, but now we were also genetically modified humanoids, and the Grays would not expect us to mingle with primitives.

"I think the Grays perceive the primitives of the south as unfit stock, so they will make for a good place to hide." Ook knelt down to pick up one more piece of wood for the fire. Satisfied that we had enough, we started back toward the cave where Reko and the others were hiding.

"How will we convince Reko and the other women of this? You know how much they fear

those primitives," I asked as I plodded along behind Ook through the vegetation and underbrush.

"I have managed to replicate the repulse device you stole. With one of those in the possession of each woman, they should feel safe enough," Ook responded quietly. He had seen a herd of giant deer ahead; one of those would make for many good meals.

Ook pointed to the game as he dropped the wood. This was a good time to hunt. I took aim at one of the deer with the weapon I had created. Winding up the gears till they were tight, I released the bolt. We needed just one kill for there were only twelve mouths to feed for this night. The kill was instant, and we approached the dead beast.

We quickly fashioned a sled with branches from the surrounding trees and dragged the deer and our firewood back to the cave. The group ate well that night and retired to sleep early, deep inside the hidden parts of the cave.

In the morning we set out south, according to Ook's plan. It would take us a good week to reach the borders of our primitive relatives. We kept mostly to the thick forest areas for protection. Whenever one of us thought he detected the sound of the Grays' search drones, he would immediately fall to the ground and cover himself in debris. This worked well against the drone's detection equipment.

While we traveled, we sometimes talked. Reko said to me, "Did you notice the Grays look a lot like us?"

I hooted with laughter. "Your eyes lie. The evil ones are much shorter. They are skinny and hairless, and they have gray skin like leather. And big heads."

"They have eyes," said Reko. "And two legs and two arms, like we do."

"They are not human," I said firmly. "Their pupils are vertical, and their irises are gray, like their skin. Besides, they only have four fingers on each hand."

Reko said no more.

Finally, we arrived in the area we had sought and crouched on a small rise overlooking the camp of primitives below. I asked, "How will we approach these men?"

Ook answered. "Blix, I have given it considerable thought. I have concluded that there is no good way to introduce ourselves. These are a violent and protective people. They are as likely to attack us on sight as they are to welcome us into the group."

"But this is our only hope for survival," I replied.

"I realize this, and have come to a conclusion," Ook said confidently, though his tone betrayed fear. "I will approach them alone, while the rest of you take up positions of tactical superiority."

"You expect a fight?" I queried as I scratched. My furs were itching me.

"I hope to avoid a fight, but it seems that you have one going on right now." Ook pointed to the tiny ants crawling on my clothing.

I began to jump about, trying to keep the ants from the tender areas of my body.

The group gathered close together, as Ook explained the plan. I had stripped off my furs and stood naked next to Reko while I continued to brush off the tiny ants, much to the amusement of the group.

"Now you will understand the value of bathing after you gorge yourself on honeycomb," Reko said. The others laughed.

After Ook explained the plan, the group broke up and we went to our designated positions. Ook walked toward the primitives, making plenty of noise so they would not think he was trying to sneak up. The primitives reacted as predicted. Once aware of his presence, they started yelling and grabbing thick sticks, smashing them violently on the ground in a threatening manner.

Ook kept advancing, never flinching or stopping, much to the confusion of the primitive humans. As soon as he was close to the group, with the repulse device hidden in his palm, he raised his hands above his head and clapped them violently.

The repulse field exploded outward, knocking all the primitives off their feet, and sending them tumbling. They were stunned but instantly reacted with violence. They rushed Ook, who calmly clapped his hands above his head, again sending the attackers spiraling backward out of control.

I was next to walk into the tribe's camp and repeat what Ook had done. Then Reko followed. One by one, the members of our small group approached the tribe, repeating Ook's actions. Finally, the primitives seemed to get the message. We then presented food as an offer of friendship. The better part of the day was spent trying to get the primitives to accept it. Finally, they did so.

Several nights followed with some of us always on guard against the attacks of the primitives, who still seemed determined to drive us out, but they could not succeed against the repulse fields. As I took my turn one night, I wondered if my group was doing to the primitives exactly what the Grays had done to us. But the situations were different, I told myself. We were simply hiding; we were not attacking or hurting the primitives. In retrospect, the Grays' actions seemed even more evil than they had at the time.

Many full moons passed overhead before the Grays' ship left the planet. We waited for a long time afterward, but it did not return. Then we melded our two groups into one cooperative unit and started the journey towards the future.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

In the fullness of time, Blix's group directed the building of a village, which eventually grew into a town. Moving onward to cities and great empires, the humanoids' rise to world dominance took only a few thousand years. The alterations the Grays had made to these humanoids gave them the gift of advanced knowledge and, with that understanding, they became the First Ones.

How do I know all this?

Blix's diaries survived and his experience influenced the actions of the First Ones, who kept records of everything. Sure that the Grays would someday return, the First Ones prepared by building three great cities underground to house themselves and their technology. The first was built on the great continent of modern-day Africa to store their knowledge and their corporeal bodies. The second was built to the east in Egypt and provided a gateway to a higher dimension. The third city, meant to be a gift to the future, a sort of time capsule, was built to the west, in Britain.

That done, most of the First Ones became of one mind, shed their bodies, and took the name of Enoch, an old word for 'people of one planet.' Now immortal, they did not return to the surface of Earth after the cities were fully functional.

Ordinary humanity continued to evolve without interference for almost a million years.

Where were the Dinosauroids while all this was happening? Remember, they were clever, and they stole much of the Grays' technology, including a couple of time-lock devices. They hung around on Earth long enough to watch what the First Ones were doing and to share some of their technology. But they, like the First Ones, were afraid the Grays would return and try to destroy them again. So, they used one of the time-locks to put themselves into a parallel

universe, one second into the future.

What happened to the First Ones who didn't meld into one mind? Good question! You're excellent at remembering details, Reader.

That's the next part of the story. This small branch of the First Ones settled on what was almost an island, connected to the mainland by just a narrow strip of land. A small verdant plain, surrounded by mountains, gave them their own country, which they called Mahoud, though in later times it was called Atlantis. And what they did with Mahoud will take your breath away!

And where was Charger during all this?

Oh, Charger wasn't born until 2010, about a million years after the Dinosauroids and the First Ones put themselves into time-lock, and long after the adventures of Mahoud. But his very beginning, like that of all humans, can be traced back to Blix and Ook, back to when the human line split from the primate line.

Yes, stop and think about it. A million years is a very long time, and I've just covered roughly sixty-three million years of history in about an hour. And you know what, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that Charger is descended from the mating of a First One with one of the primitive humans.

Why? Because of his brilliance in mathematics, because of his powerful brain. Of course, he's descended from ordinary humans who were allowed to evolve naturally, but who can know where his DNA came from?

No, Reader, all that brilliance does not make him fun to talk with! Anyway, Charger doesn't talk. He acts.

Ready for the story of Mahoud? Oh, this story happened about fifteen or sixteen thousand years ago. In the history of the universe, that's like five minutes.

Chapter 3 Mahoud

Visha was, in most respects, a typical twelve-year-old boy, with two pesky younger sisters. His father was a very important scientist and would often take Visha to the university on weekends, encouraged by the boy's eagerness to start sampling the higher learning planned for his future.

This day Visha rose early from his bed, hurried to dress in his long robes of silk and hagfish fibers, and stumbled downstairs to eat a quick meal before he and his father went off for the morning. He was greeted by his two sisters, Malef and Shaquan. "When will papa take us to the workshops?" they whined.

"Hopefully never, should fate be merciful," teased Visha.

"Now, now, don't be so mean to your sisters, or you will be punished for arrogance," Visha's mother said. "Hurry now! Eat and then wash your hands. Your father is waiting for you outside. And wear some sandals this time."

Visha tried to be dignified, as befitted his age, but he was almost too excited to eat. Today was going to be different. His father had mentioned that they would not be going to the university as they usually did. In the normal way of things, the boy would have been disappointed because he was fascinated by his father's ongoing experiments with the clear slime exuded by hagfish as a defense mechanism.

The Mahouds had been conducting such experiments for thousands of years and farmed hagfish in deep ponds as well as harvesting them from the ocean. They made wearable fabric from the slime but also used it as a defense themselves. They had perfected a way of enclosing the slime in a clear envelope which functioned as a complete body suit, worn by scouts who flew to other areas seeking information. The primitive, murderous tribes were terrified of Mahouds in these suits, for they appeared to be moving, quivering masses of liquid refracting light in a rainbow effect. The suits were semi-transparent, and the solid body inside seemed to shift back and forth in a way that made it impossible to pinpoint an exact shape or its location. The primitives knelt down, faces buried in the dirt, to worship these Mahoud explorers, who thus explored the continent in peace.

Though Visha hoped to follow in his father's footsteps and become a scientist himself, he couldn't help being excited because his father was taking him today to see the Nine great ones. The boy could not believe his luck, for almost no one ever visited the Nine of Nines, and with good reason. These old ones were the greatest minds in existence and had little interest in the affairs of ordinary mortals. Even at twelve, Visha had learned all about the great ones from school. What he didn't know was that he had been summoned by the Nines and his father was quite concerned, though he did not reveal this to Visha.

Father and son stepped onto their transport and sat down. Visha's father removed the restraints from the anti-gravity attachments on the corners and waved his hands over the front of their vehicle until a small rope-like thread of fibrous materials arose. He tipped his head forward, moved his long gray hair aside and, with his left hand, raised the end of the fiber to join its connector with a surgically installed link in the back of his neck. Within moments, his own electrical circuits, enhanced by the vehicle's mechanisms, created a glowing field of golden light around the two occupants, and the transport began to rise from the ground.

Visha liked travel. Though there was no indication of motion inside the vehicle, he loved to

jump up or stand as the transport dipped and swerved dramatically.

Within moments the great city disappeared behind them, and the ring of mountains appeared on the horizon. Soon they approached the temple of the Nines. The transport slowed, hovered for a moment, and gently touched down at the base of the great temple's steps. Visha and his father stepped out and Visha's father rolled up the flat transport, much as one might roll up a carpet, and placed it under his arm.

"Si Eed, it is good to see you, my old friend," a grizzled gray-haired man said, "and this must be your boy, Visha? Where is your lovely wife? Why do you always come alone?"

Visha's father said, "Because I trust you so little around women, my old friend." They both laughed. "Excuse me, my friend, we have business in the temple," Si Eed said, and guided his son up the great steps and through a broad, open archway into the temple.

The interior was astonishing in its purity, with white stone walls and clear glass-like floors polished to reflect the sunlight. The hallways were wide and long and the ceiling high, making Visha feel insignificant. Rooms opened off the halls on both sides, but Visha knew better than to glance inside them. The main precepts everyone learned, right from birth, were peace, privacy, and respect for one another. Doorways existed, but doors were not considered necessary.

Visha followed his father along the halls for quite a distance before entering a narrow pathway that led to a lower level. This pathway was rough and simple in comparison to the halls they had walked through. At the bottom, the pathway ended before a wide opening where both Visha and his father stopped and gazed politely at the ground. From deep within the room, a voice spoke.

"Si Eed, let the boy enter, then leave us. Come forward, Visha. We command this." The tone was clear and commanding, though seemed to have a slight tremor. Young Visha turned to his father, concerned. Si Eed gave him a reassuring touch on the shoulder and urged him onward.

When Visha looked up and stepped inside, he could see no end to the room, no matter where he looked. It was a vast space with a dirt floor and a low ceiling made of rough-cut stone.

The Nines were a shock to most who first saw them, for they were in fact, nine human bodies, both male and female, joined by the tops of their heads. They lay upon a special star-shaped platform so that their heads, which had been surgically attached to one another from youth, were all in the center of the star. They never made eye contact with anyone, for they lay on their backs always looking upward. But Visha was sure that they knew where he stood and how he looked.

Their brains had intertwined, and it was said that this brain mass gave them incredible powers of intelligence, perhaps nine times nine more than the normal person. Altogether, there were nine groups of humans conjoined, in nine different parts of the land, one at each point of the compass, north, south, east, and west, and at the midpoints, northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest. And one special group in the center of all, the Nine of Nines, where Visha now stood. The Nines decided everything for the people of Mahoud, also known as Atlantis, for Mahoud was the body and the Nines its mind.

"Approach us, young one, and do not be afraid, for we have need of you," said the clear voice. "Time is becoming short. Not only have brutal primitives thrust themselves upon us and made the world too impure to bear, the earth is also destined for a vast coldness. We are too old for the journey that Mahoud must take, and nine children have been called to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. You have been chosen to guide the city from this place to a new place of peace. You are to be one of the Nine which will navigate the black skies."

"I am sorry, great ones," Visha said, as he bowed down and hid his face in shame. "I do not

understand what you are asking of me."

"It matters not; all will be revealed when you are joined. Celebrate this day with your family, for a great honor is bestowed upon you," the speaker for the Nine said.

The people of Mahoud were far advanced in technology and intelligence compared to the primitive humans massing on the rest of Earth and camping in their hundreds on the strip of land connecting the city-state to the continent. Many thousands of years before, the First Ones had met the Dinosauroids, and not only respected them as superior beings, but used and improved on their inventions. When the Dinosauroids suddenly disappeared, as if swept from Earth in a single instant, this branch of the First Ones secluded itself from the inferior and warlike primitive humans by retiring to this near-island. They also developed robotic guards, installing in each one a primitive controlling device perhaps the size of a shoebox and powering them with radioactive particles.

The humans who lived in the villages lying before the city gates had always been dirty, vile, and primitive. They attacked other tribes merely for the pleasure of capturing very young girls and scarring them for sexual gratification. The Mahoud elders, from high atop their towers, were appalled as they watched the aggression toward the young, the weak, and the elderly.

Lately, Mahoud patrols had discovered a new type of human far to the north. They were notably different from the local brutes, shorter, more robust, more massive in muscle, and larger in brain capacity. At first, the learned ones thought these new humans might be of some use to the cities, both as cheap labor and guards. But, alas, when the Mahoud patrols managed to capture a few specimens, it was discovered that they were extremely passive.

These new humans were clearly more intelligent than the dirty ones, for they had a primitive language, a combination of grunts and clicks. Nevertheless, their passive nature made them unsuitable as laborers and so they were left alone. Unfortunately, the dirty ones took every opportunity to hunt and rape these passive peoples wherever they were found. Eventually the elders learned that the dirty ones had managed to wipe out all the passive new humans for at least as far north as the Mahoud patrols flew.

The time had come to remove Mahoud completely from the twisted creatures, for the safety of all its citizens.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

No, the Mahouds did not simply pack their suitcases and move, leaving their beautiful buildings and wonderful country for the brutal primitives to ravage. They took the country with them.

You say that's not possible, Reader?

But it happened, and they used antigravity to do it. For millions of years a portion of Earth's core had been working its way to the surface and, when it neared four hundred miles from the upper mantle, the immense pressures of over-lying rock shifted rapidly, allowing a large fragment to surge toward the surface. However, the shift also broke this core piece into smaller shards which were not powerful enough by themselves to entirely penetrate Earth's shell. Thus, they lay undiscovered until the Toba eruption.

It was this Toba volcanic eruption of 70,000 BCE which ejected the small fragments of Earth's core to the surface. It must have been stupendous, though I'm glad I wasn't around to experience it. Humans had never faced such a large and extraordinary eruption, considered by

later standards as a deep earthquake and the nearest to level 10 on the Richter scale ever experienced.

Well, as the ejected fragments of the core cooled, they took on the properties of antigravity, much like placing two magnets of opposite charges in proximity to one another. The immense pressures in Earth's core determined the polarity of the planet's magnetic field but, as the core fragment was no longer subjected to pressure and heat, the cooling fragments flipped their magnetic field to become antigravity.

No, the shards weren't discovered right away. It would have been impossible to approach the area for a long time. But eventually things cooled down enough for human exploration.

At first only small pieces of these magic rocks were dug out of the ground. Those who found them held them to be sacred for they had the power of lifting heavy objects into the air. Releasing such a shard would cause it to rise and disappear forever, so great care was taken to secure shards to the ground by placing them between manganite stones, canceling their effect. Eventually technology was developed that could retrieve the whole core fragment and it was soon learned that the fragment could be controlled by placing dense materials near it to repel or attract the stone so that it moved in a desired direction.

Yes, Reader, a steering system. Anyway, that was how the first human antigravity-powered drive was built for the tiny island continent of Mahoud.



The antigravity drive took hundreds of years to perfect, and many lives were lost in the process, but the small island continent of Mahoud finally transformed itself into the first sky city. As the island ripped itself from Earth's surface, debris fell everywhere. The ground shook and a great crackling filled the air, sending the primitive humans scurrying to their shamans for protection. The city rose ever upward, while the seas surged forth in boiling chaos, filling the void which Mahoud had occupied. The whole world seemed to tremble, as if awed by man's victory over the elements.

From the eight points of the compass, the towers that stood atop the mountains ringing Mahoud began to glow. Joining their powers, the Nine of Nines created a dome of radiant golden light, powered by radioactive particles, emerging from the towers to encase the continent and people of Mahoud. Now safe in their domed flying city, the land of Mahoud began gliding above the surface of the planet, seeking a better place to live.

For a hundred years, surrounded by clouds and invisible to the ground dwellers, Mahoud drifted above Earth in search of a more congenial location, but wherever it wandered, the humans appeared to be as vile and primitive as those they had left behind. The people began to despair of finding a new home.

Visha and his eight compatriots had long since grown to manhood. Bound to one another by their skulls in the center of the flying state of Mahoud, they were now more than a hundred years of age, and wise beyond all their ancestors. Great were the powers of these Nine, for their minds, in concert, were strong enough to control the direction Mahoud could fly. They searched, and went on searching for many years, never finding the place of peace they were tasked to achieve.

The Nines then turned their gaze to the blackness of space to seek a different world that they might own and control, a world where they could finally be at peace. They knew it might take many, many generations to find a new Earth, and preparations were made to live in the black sky for thousands of years.

The Nine of Nines guided the antigravity engine, first of all to leave Earth, then to have Mahoud pulled toward the moon, then to repel the moon as they passed, and be attracted to another planet, like a gravitational slingshot. On and on, for years, Mahoud would fly to a planet, then push away from that planet and fly toward another.

The time arrived when the flying city-state reached the last planet in our solar system, a small, cold, barren orb. They passed it by, and the vastness of empty black space stretched out before them like an endless road might appear to an ant. At first the Nine of Nines were confused, for their gravity engine had nothing to grab on to, and for a while the space farer simply drifted.

"I wonder," Visha finally said to his eight compatriots, "if we should set a course for Alpha Centauri. It is the nearest solar system to that of Earth." It had been agreed by these eight sages that Visha would act as leader when decisions were to be made. Though their brains were joined and used as one single powerful instrument to control the country, their minds could still function independently, thus affording each a small but precious measure of privacy.

"Why not?" asked Sarama. "Earth's system is pair-bonded with Alpha Centauri; we are binary, for we orbit the center of the Milky Way side by side."

"There would be many more planets to choose from," Kumar offered.

Visha mused, "We have traded planets in the past, though not in recent eons. It would take us a very long time to get there, probably thousands of years. We travel so very slowly."

They decided to aim for Alpha Centauri. After all, they had nowhere else to go.

But their flying city was destined never to reach Alpha Centauri. One day a new planet, the tenth planet of Earth's solar system, appeared in the distance, a black orb invisible against the backdrop of inky black space, but whose presence was detected by the Nines and their instruments. Visha decided that it would be good to use this passing body as a gravitational slingshot, speeding up their journey.

Many generations of their people had lived and died during the long flight, so perhaps impatience fueled the Nine's decision, but attracting the black planet was the worst decision they could have made. They were able to grab the rogue planet with the gravity drive but could not escape the planet's own mighty grasp. As a result, Mahoud crashed so hard into this planet that it penetrated the thin surface crust and buried itself inside the planet's hollow black belly, acting as a plug for the break. There, fortunately, it continued to generate gravity, stabilizing the planet.

The Mahoud continent was domed, and the dome held, though many people were killed by the impact. Only two of the outer towers survived and, luckily, these two towers kept the vacuum of space from rushing into the hollow world and killing everyone. Many of the Nine of Nines had died, though the group into which Visha had been blended suffered only two deaths.

Visha knew that human nature would cause most people to instinctively look for someone to blame for the great misfortune. As leader of his Nine, it fell to him to calm the fear and panic which the survivors faced and to give everything a positive spin. With care and logic, he formulated duties for the unhurt individuals to perform, helping those with the lightest injuries to tend to those needing immediate care. He directed others to begin stabilizing the remaining two towers. The undamaged robots were immediately ordered to put out fires to prevent the wasteful consumption of needed oxygen. The water they had carried with them in travel was checked and rationed.

Visha was thus the guiding force behind the success of the survivors. The two perished members of his Nine were surgically replaced with survivors from one of the other groups of Nine. At full capacity again, the Nine started planning, not just to survive, but to make out of

their mistake a brilliant success. Like a man possessed, Visha drove the other eight minds at a frenzied pace, for he knew that death would soon claim him. He was, after all, nearly five hundred years old. Thus, he organized, delegated, and responded with such vigor that, within a month of the crash, most things had been stabilized.

It started with a complete redesign of the Mahoud robots and the building of the first generation of Taskers. These Taskers were more efficient, smarter, faster, stronger, and more durable than the previous robots. Able to survive the hostile nature of space, they could gather resources the city needed to build on its successes.

The redesign did not proceed without a mysterious tragedy, however. Pitar, one of the scientists working on the new robots, begged audience with the Nine of Nines. "Great ones," Pitar said, "May I speak? Something very strange happened while my staff and I were taking our last sleep period."

"Tell me," Visha said, summoning energy to deal with yet another problem.

"First, we were wakened by an explosion. Not inside the dome, of course."

"Of course not." The Nine would have known if that had been the case. "But it must have been inside the planet. Perhaps an earthquake?"

Pitar shook his head, then remembered the Nines would be looking at the ceiling, not at him. "We don't think so, great ones. It was sudden and must have been very loud, for we could hear it even inside the sleeping quarters."

"Is that all?" Visha asked.

"No, great one. We heard nothing else and, as you have said, we thought it might be a quake, and so we went back to sleep. But, when we went to the lab to return to work, we found Arun murdered."

"Murdered!" Visha could not suppress his shock. Mahouds did not kill one another. "Are you sure it was murder?"

"Yes, great one. His neck was broken and there was fear on his face. But it was not one of us. Someone strange had been inside the lab. Someone very large, for a chair had been broken, as if crushed from the top of the seat. Things were tumbled about."

"Was anything missing?" Visha asked.

"No, although the plans for the new Taskers were out of order and there were dirty fingerprints on the corner of one sheet. Very large fingerprints."

"What about the prototype?"

"It didn't appear to have been touched, great one. We could find nothing changed in any way. It is working just as well as it did before this happened."

Visha closed his eyes. If an alien being was in the planet, where had it come from? Or had it always been there? Or perhaps someone disliked Arun so much that the stress of the deaths and this new home had caused him to break his conditioning and actually commit murder. If such a man existed, his friends were covering up for him. As for the explosion, Earth suffered quakes, so why not this planet? "Thank you for reporting this, Pitar. The Nine will consult on the matter."

Pitar exited the Nine of Nine's large room and Visha consulted with himself. He felt quite sure that the hollow planet contained no life forms other than his own people and that it would be impossible for anyone to come in from outside. No one could survive in outer space. Which meant that Arun's death had been caused by another Mahoud. This was tragic and worthy of universal tears, but what would it avail to discover him? Any true Mahoud would suffer worse pain than death simply for knowing he had broken the first law. If another death occurred, as he suspected it might, he would know that the culprit had taken his own life.

Yes, he would consult with his eight companions. That is, when they were not consulting on a great many more crucial matters.

One of these matters was the fact that this new Earth had turned out to be a rogue planet wandering far outside old Earth's solar system. The Nine of Nines eventually worked out, to their amazement, that every five hundred years, it actually did orbit Earth's sun, but then veered off out of the system and into deep space, where it orbited a giant red sun only once before returning to Earth's solar system. Its path looked rather like the figure eight, though the two loops were a long distance apart.

The Nine did not give up hope of someday returning to Earth. Therefore, they chose to name the black planet Alcazaba, meaning fortress, a place that would protect them until such time as they might leave. Soon after that decision was made, within a year of the crash, Visha perished, but the legacy of building he started raced onward undiminished.

Because Alcazaba was pure carbon, a relatively soft element, the survivors were able to further hollow it out, and create an atmosphere of oxygen, and from that, water. It was possible to walk anywhere inside the hollow world since gravity worked from the outer shell. Because the planet was so large, looking at the horizon was the same as looking at the horizon on Earth. And, because they had so much digging, burrowing, and constructing to do, the Mahouds developed wonderful machines to do the work.

They soon constructed a space port inside the planet, using the path taken by the city-state, to serve as an entrance for spaceships. The first small ships they built were piloted by Taskers and sent out into the cosmos to gather materials they needed. The Taskers found asteroids rich in ice, and that, along with the carbon of Alcazaba, gave Mahoud the minerals it needed to build beautiful structures, just as it had when the continent was attached to Earth.

The Mahouds themselves chose not to continue exploring space. With a sadly depleted population, they needed everyone, old and young, to contribute to the building of their new life and their new home. After such a very long time of drifting through space, the idea of 'home' had become a cherished ideal.

The original Mahoud island remained domed, with artificial light to illuminate it and an entrance hidden behind a waterfall, which kept out the dust and debris arising from construction in the rest of the planet. Visha had decided that an artificial sun resembling the sun in Earth's system was needed for the growth of plants and expansion of living areas into the rest of the hollow planet. This construct would not shine into the city dome because almost none of the planet's carbon interior around the dome had been dug away.

The creation of the artificial sun was an immense achievement, the brainchild of Visha. He would be forever revered as the one who brought light to the blackness of Alcazaba. Though Visha did not live to see its construction, the entire process was thought out and executed from his design. So brilliant was his plan that no alterations were ever needed, though the construction went on for several years. Hundreds of Tasker robots walked their way on the inner curvature of the world to a point directly vertical from the city's central square. There they built the factory that created the internal sun; they used controlled radioactive particles contained in carbon-rich structures to emit energy which was then used to propagate high-intensity sound waves.

These sound waves were in turn used to excite rare subatomic particles to the point that they would spontaneously generate light in a specially created gigantic geodesic carbon dome. With the first intense sparks of light, the Taskers building the project were instantly vaporized but the shadows had been finally chased away. This sun provided light, but no gravitational effects, and so the balance of the city-state of Mahoud was maintained.

In time, the entire interior of this rogue black world became a garden of immense beauty, vastly different from the world the Mahouds had once lived on. Small towns were built. Great fields of plants and exotic animals were created, adapted to the ways of the planet. Life was good.

As individuals in the Nines died, the Mahouds did not replace them. Every Mahoud, under the influence of peace and plenty, had become as intelligent and wise as the elders had been of old. However, statues of the elders, the largest of Visha because of his sacrifice, were built and honored for all days.



Thousands of years later, a descendant of Visha's family, Endellan, spent her mornings strolling the stone walkways that encircled the shrine to Visha and the survivors, happily enjoying the peace and beauty. She was always accompanied by Morrie, her small tan and white terrier. Few Mahouds now spent time in the gardens she loved to maintain. The place was sacred and regarded as too important for tourists from outside the city to plague. The still body of water shimmering and reflecting the sun's light gave the place a magical ambience, casting away shadows and inviting the eyes to gaze reverently upon the statues dotting the grounds. In the center of the grounds rose one statue above all others. That was Visha, the one who had guided and ensured the survival of all Mahoud.

Endellan knew that after the great city-state of Mahoud had traveled the void and crashed into this black hollow world, there were very few survivors. It made her sad to read how very dark things were in those first few days. Cries of pain filled the air, and little could be done to help the dying. The gravity drive had remained intact, so the survivors at least had the ability to move about naturally save for the great damage. Most survivors simply lay where they fell for several hours, if not days, before reacting to the situation.

As a direct descendant of Visha's family, Endellan was more than just an ordinary groundskeeper. Many mornings found her picking up the smallest bits of litter and pulling the tiniest weeds. This day, as morning gave way to afternoon, Endellan chose a new place to eat her lunch. Sitting in a rocky spot that allowed her feet to rest in the warm water, she stared out over the calm blue waters at the temple, which had been built on an island in the center of a deep lake. The island was connected to the shoreline by a long bridge. She laughed as small fish swam up and tried to nibble on her toes, and threw bits of food into the water for them, as well as bigger bites to Morrie.

As she sat, she felt the ground under her lurch once. The dog whined. Then nothing. Odd, she thought. Perhaps she imagined it. Mahoud never experienced earthquakes now, though apparently it had in the past. She went back to feeding the tiny, sparkling fish, then spent the rest of the day placing small statuettes in new locations, replanting flower beds and generally fussing over the little things.

The following day she decided to again return to the rocky spot to eat her lunch, but the rocks she'd sat on the day before were under water. What could cause the waters to rise? This went on for some time and, little by little, the water began to rise up over the grounds she so treasured. Endellan spoke to the city staff, and inspectors came to look at it, but all were quite perplexed.

Alcazaba had so far provided a solid foundation for the city, and no one ever thought that the lands could sink, but this was what was happening. Magnetic forces deep beneath their feet

were at play, causing the waters to rise and cover the island temple. Those forces arose from the city's gravity drive, pieces of old Earth's fragmented core held together to create a stable surface for Mahoud. This threat to the stability of the world was only fully realized when, one morning, the temple complex finally submerged overnight, swallowed into the large blue body of water, never to be seen again.

The Mahoud engineers soon learned that, while the radiation emitted from their created sun was not very harmful to humans, it weakened the core fragment. That was what had caused the water to rise and swamp the island temple. The weakness in the core fragment also began to affect the gravity experienced by people.

This was only the beginning. The radiation gradually caused mutation in the plants they grew. The ingestion of plant matter by the herbivores who were, in turn, consumed by the humans, along with generous amounts of plant matter, began to alter the gestation period and the growth of newborn infants. This alteration exacerbated the existing condition of dwarfism acquired as an island nation on Earth. Now adaptation was producing small-bodied, large-brained individuals who were more reliant on their advanced robots, the Taskers, than they had been on the old ones.

Endellan was sad to see the disappearance of her beloved refuge on the water, but she understood the changes that were taking place on their world, and she was one of those who guided the plans carried out to save the people. Their most radical adaptation was the building of extremely complex synthetic suits into which they encapsulated themselves. The suits included goggles to protect their eyes from the sun's radiation. The goggles made everyone look as if they had gold-colored multifaceted eyes, much like the huge eyes of dragonflies. The surface of the protective suit absorbed minute particles of carbon and eventually appeared almost black.

There were, however, dissidents to this solution. These dissidents saw themselves as non-interfering individuals who wanted to continue a pure, natural adaptation to the changing environment. They decided that, whatever the consequences of evolution on this world, they would allow it to happen to them, and so decided that retreating to an area outside the influence of the city was the best course. They spent many days wandering in the wilderness until they chanced upon a place called the promised land by the leader of the group. Following him, they entered the Valley of Shadows, never to interact with their city kin again. They were thus lost to the memories of Mahoud.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Why was Alcazaba hollow?

Oh, didn't I explain that? When the black sphere was first created, it spun so fast that all the center mass of the planetoid was thrown centrifugally outward, creating a hollow at the center. As more matter impacted the outer surface, the planetoid created a gravitation well at its center. Objects were attracted to the planetoid at first, much as a spinning magnet might attract metal filings, but over the vastness of time, the rotation slowed because of gravitational forces and because of objects hitting the surface against the direction of spin.

Yes, the giant red sun will appear in the story later on. Well, not the sun itself, but a planet which orbits it, and which was mined by the Mahoud's robots until humans colonized it as New Eden. Yes, I know you're impatient, but I simply can't tell you everything at once.

When will Charger be in the story? Very soon, Reader. The historical events I'm talking

about all affect his life. You know, in order to understand what's happening in the present, sometimes you have to know what happened before.

No, I'm not being pompous! The Grays and the Dinosauroids and the First Ones are all important parts of the story.

Yes, Charger likes dogs. Henry especially liked dogs. His father got him a collie after his mother died, and Henry spent a lot of time with it.

I'll see what I can do about getting one for you, but it will be very difficult, perhaps even impossible. Later you will learn why.

Chapter 4 A trip to Galactic Central

The Grays had used their time-lock millions of years in the past, in an effort to save their race from a viral infection. Activating it on Earth, they traveled through time at a greatly reduced rate. Three hundred years in time-lock equaled the passing of sixty-three million years of universe time, an unexpected result, and the reason it had, long before, been deemed a black project by the Grays' council.

The Grays re-entered the time stream of Earth at about two million years BCE, when several species of hominids walked the surface of the planet. Most Grays left Earth at this time, setting out to reconquer their once vast territories in space. But a rogue group proposed that the greatest of all knowledge lay within their grasp: a chance to find god. They believed a creator must exist, and that this creator was building everything from the center of the galaxy, forever expanding outward. With their vast knowledge, they constructed a small but mighty ship, capable of incredible speeds. They reengineered a group of Earth hominids to act as intelligent monkeys, much as America did with monkeys during the space race in the twenty-first century. It took them most of a million years to do this, but time meant nothing to the clones of Betelle.

They placed seventy of the new hominoids in stasis, to be reactivated when the ship reached the center of the Milky Way galaxy. The hominoids were programmed to carry out given tasks, and then return with the information to the Grays, who had chosen to place themselves in time-lock again while they waited. The hominoids proved to be a bit unruly, like the Dinosauroids, and clever enough for several of them to escape confinement before the Grays managed to create enough volunteers for the mission. The Grays cared little for this event, thinking them too stupid and ill-prepared to survive for very long, and dismissed the runaways. They would surely soon meet their demise.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Were Blix and Ook the hominoids who escaped from the Grays?

You're right. And yes, that was about a couple of million years ago. They're the ones who prospered and went on to become First Ones and Mahouds. The ones the Grays sent to the center of the galaxy were the ones who didn't escape, the ones who became extremely intelligent and long-lived, but obedient to the Grays. Slaves, in effect.

You think that if Charger had been alive then, he could have defeated the Grays?

I told you before, Reader, Charger is not a hero, he's a bad idea.

How can I say that about my own father? Because I know him. Charger has many talents, but being a hero is not one of them. He has no patience, either.

You're going to make up your own mind when you meet him? Good for you! I admire an independent spirit.



General Harris was, for the most part, as human as those he lived among, with the exception that he had been engineered to think at a more advanced level, and was bred by the Grays to be

obedient. His part on the long trek to the center of the galaxy was as a security controller. He and a few others were designed to make sure that the hominoids never took unnecessary risks. Harris was one of the first brought out of stasis when the great craft arrived at its destination. After five hundred thousand years of travel to the Galactic Center, the Grays wanted no mistakes that might ruin their investigation. Harris and his team were to ensure that it was safe to wake the remaining crew members so that they could carry out their predesignated tasks.

One of the crew members was a fair-haired, delicate female, bred to think through tasks of a complex nature, more complex than any artificial intelligence was capable of completing. More than just a monkey waiting to have events happen to it, she was designed to interact with and judge the nature of god, the creator at the center. Therefore, when their mighty craft reached its destination, and Harris and the others found it safe to revive the remaining crew, she was one of the first chosen.

But, with the discovery of what was at the center of all that is known, things almost immediately spiraled out of control.

The first task assigned to the young female and her team was to visually record what they found, but it was soon realized, that as distant as they were from the center, they were still too close to determine individual shapes. All the missing mass of the galaxy was here, the answer to a mystery that astronomers had long been trying to solve. The speed of the orbiting stars and the associated gravitational force proved that there was far more mass in the galaxy than could, so far, be seen or detected by any means. And here it was: a mass of dark matter so incredibly huge that the ship's crew, trained as they were, found it impossible to comprehend.

The ship was commanded to 'back up' until a clearer picture could be had and, a few months later, with enough space gained, the first image was recorded. This particular mass, enormous in scale, hung dark and foreboding before them. But the image they had gained was pointless. At such a distance, almost no definable details could be seen. The object appeared only as ambiguous blackness. The next command was then implemented, and the great ship started a course forward, returning to the center, with the goal of extracting a sample.

The crew of this craft had determined that the god mass was a solid object and could be landed upon. It held no gravity and so posed no threat, but it had blocked all attempts from space to analyze its composition. Gauging the distance to the surface was difficult, but not impossible. The crew settled on a rather basic technology to determine how to find a solid point to land their craft. They simply jettisoned some cargo in the direction of the mass. Following the falling object at some distance, the ship took six months of Earth time before seeing the cargo container finally impact the surface.

After the craft had made contact with the surface, a crew of hominoids set foot on the surface and began drilling for core samples. To Harris's dismay, the first three-person team that tried gaining a sample was completely absorbed into the surface they stood on. After several attempts and the death of eighteen crew members, including the brilliant young female, the next logical step was to leave the surface and try instead to get a sample from orbit. Members of the crew rarely communicated; they were designed to simply follow programming set out by their command structure.

In orbit again, they launched a small probe at the surface. It buried itself deep into the mass, cut a sample, then retracted, all within a few seconds of being launched. It headed back to the ship. The black mass actually appeared to flinch and, at the point of impact, a welt began to form. This bump became a rounded hill, then grew to the size of a mountain, which tore itself from the surface and began approaching the Grays' spacecraft. This round black mountain, in

comparison to the god mass, was very small, but to the crew it looked the size of a planet. The next command executed was for self-preservation. The ship turned and sped away, back toward Earth, back to the time-locked Grays. The black sphere pursued, but at a much slower speed. The hominoids in the spaceship returned to stasis.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Yes, you're right, the distance from the Galactic Center to Earth is very great. Even using the Grays' advanced drive, it still took better than five hundred thousand years to make the trip. They could travel near the speed of light with their standard drive system, but this was too slow to travel the vast distance between the center of the galaxy and Earth.

You want to know about the advanced drive? All right, listen closely.

Repeatedly the ship would re-emerge into known space, find another quantum-entangled particle somewhere in the direction they wanted to travel, and recreate themselves at this new destination. The Grays had long known the best way to travel the void was at the quantum level, even though it meant destroying and recreating themselves in the process.

The process was quite simple, however. They linked a particle they possessed to a particle at the destination where they wanted to go. Because this distant quantum particle was the opposite charge to the particle they had, it was considered binary. The particle they had was 'one,' the particle where they wanted to go to was 'zero.' The universe is vast, but not empty; matter exists everywhere. The Grays sent information to the binary particle to first attract matter with which to build a four-dimensional printer in space.

The printers? The old three-dimensional printers that humans developed a long time ago could print out a non-living three-dimensional object. The four-dimensional printer the Grays used produced living, thinking objects. That was the center of their drive system, and once the link was established, it could begin printing the information sent to this distant location. In this case, the Grays were sending exact information of the entire structure of the ship and its crew.

No, that's right, matter can neither be created nor destroyed. But it can be rearranged. So, to keep the universe in balance, the information describing the object or living individual that the Grays sent to the new location resulted in the destruction of the original. But with the information sent, the original lived again in the new location.

The Grays soon discovered that after creating the printer at the destination they wished to travel to, it was more efficient to create the objects they needed from the matter found at that destination. Fractal geometry was the basis of this reasoning; it made little sense to send matter great distances when matter was already at the point where they wanted to be. They would thus recreate the ship and crew at the destination, and go on to the next destination.

You want to travel somewhere that way, Reader? Perhaps you'll get the chance soon. But first, we must finish the story.

Yes, I'll try to remember about the dog, but we don't have much time.



While out of stasis, Harris and some other hominoids had questions regarding the god fragment they now possessed. They were programmed to carry out tasks for the Grays, which meant they had to be relatively smart and, naturally, this included a heightened sense of wonder.

Thus, curiosity drove the hominoids to begin experimenting on the god fragment. The ship contained several advanced technologies which they could use to study and explore its properties. The groups took turns, each spending a year conducting studies, then reviving other members of the crew to continue the study. Over the years, they managed to unlock the mystery of the god fragment.

When the great breakthrough came, the awakened crew decided to land on what was later named New Eden, a planet relatively close to Earth. They decided to place a team on New Eden to continue studying half the god fragment. The rest would re-enter stasis and continue, with the other half of the fragment, back to Earth.

The god fragment was sentient; this was the shock of the hominoids' discovery. It did not speak or think, but it could create. Like a tree creating seeds which fall to earth and grow new trees, like an insect that through procreation creates more insects, like bacteria that create more bacteria, the god fragment created life. It could be given any piece of matter, even a dead and desiccated leaf from a tree and, through contact, bring that leaf back to life.

Now the hominoids realized that the power of immortality was the true goal of the Grays. The center of the galaxy was the force that created life. But what was the huge, black, spherical object that had left the center and was pursuing them?

Harris himself had to return to Earth for he was one of the directors of the ship, not an ordinary crew member. He would tell the Grays that the members of the crew left on New Eden had perished in the first attempts on the black mass. The Grays wouldn't care who had died as long as they got the god fragment.

The team that remained on New Eden scavenged what parts and technology they could from the ship, hoping the Grays wouldn't notice the losses. This team consisted of four members, three females and a male. They had shelters and enough supplies to live on New Eden for several years, giving them a chance to create a colony and get a foothold on the world.

But the male member of the team soon succumbed to illness and died. The three women decided to subject his body to the god fragment. Subjecting inanimate matter, devoid of consciousness, to the god fragment created life. However, to subject a once living and self-aware being to the fragment created a monster bent on rape, murder, and cannibalism.

With only one woman from the team left alive and hiding in a cave from the monster that stalked the planet's surface, she carved a small primitive statue of the god she prayed to. Though she and the other hominoids were advanced in technology, their understanding of art was still at the level of early Neanderthals and *Homo erectus*. She prayed in hopes of escaping the fate the other two women had suffered.

Her prayers were in vain.

Many hundreds of years later, one of the children of New Eden, playing explorer, discovered a small statue of a woman in a cave. Most people in the settlement thought someone had played a prank on the little girl, but she was sure it was very old. She had no idea how right she was.

When the Grays re-entered Earth's time stream in the 1700s, coinciding with the arrival of the ship from the center of the galaxy, things began to change. The news about the pursuing black sphere disturbed the rogue Gray group, and it was decided to speed up the evolution of humanity to ensure that an army of followers could be created in time to defend Earth from the god sphere. Thus began the Industrial Revolution, an explosion of technological development. Sometimes humanity wandered off course, but a few well-chosen hominoids from the returned spacecraft, placed at key points in humanity's technological growth, soon brought them back to focus on the Grays' goal.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

The venture to the center of the galaxy, of course, had been a mistake.

Why?

To look for evidence of a creator flies in the face of reason and is the height of arrogance. No one with a true understanding of reason and science would ever think it possible to test for the presence of a god.

Yes, I know I told you that the Grays were brilliant. And so they were, in many ways. They were far advanced in technology but, like humanity, this rogue group had a superstitious fascination with discovering a creator. Perhaps they thought a creator would give them more power. Humanity fell for this line of thinking many times in its history and, as still proves true, only a being blinded by faith could reason that such a quest was credible.

What happened to the black sphere following the ship?

Oh, it arrived eventually. But when it did appear in the solar system, humanity paid the price for the arrogance of the Grays.

Chapter 5 The trigger

DART SPEAKS TO READER:

The event I'm about to relate happened roughly seven thousand years ago, in about 2350 BCE. After that we're going to leap ahead to 2030 CE, when the aliens invaded, which caused Henry to become Charger, who went on to change the history of Earth and humanity.

You want him to tell this story?

I have to remind you, Reader, that Charger doesn't talk much. He's too busy creating history. You'll have to make do with me.

Am I a hero? Oh, Reader, don't be flippant. Who would ever regard me as a hero? A skinny guy in a wizard's hat and cloak? Do I look like I could save the world?

Well, yes, I do know quite a lot. But sometimes I wish I didn't.



It had been thousands of years since the great city of Mahoud sailed the inky blackness of space, only to crash into the rogue tenth planet of Earth's solar system. The survivors adapted their mighty technology to thrive inside the black heart of the carbon planet, Alcazaba, changing human physiology into the small black beings they became. However, one male human of old Earth, Si Shim, had been saved intact, to be sent back to the home world someday to discover whether it would be possible to return.

That time had come, and Si Shim was revived from deep cryogenic sleep and prepared for the task ahead. Using their most recent technologies, they placed him back into deep sleep and sent him, along with a programmed Tasker robot, in a ship with gravity drive, back to Earth. For many, many years, the small ship traveled through dark space until it found its way to Earth. As the ship moved silently through the clouds that blocked the view from below, Si Shim revived and discovered that humanity had indeed survived.

However, the humans were still dirty and primitive and obviously hadn't advanced much since the time of Mahoud's exodus. The other, gentler humans of differing genetic physiology had perished, their remains discovered in the Neander Valley of modern-day Germany.

After many months of observation, Si Shim decided to land his craft and interact with these primitive distant cousins. Some humans had clearly built a significant culture with towering structures of triangular design in deserts and in some deeply forested locations. But it was the people in the south of what was later known as Britain who most intrigued the lone man. They appeared stoic in nature and primitive in intellect, and he doubted that they understood the nature of the massive subterranean power source beneath their gigantic stone ring.

The fact that they had built a stone circle on top of an unusual underground energy source fascinated Si Shim. His craft had detected the energy source but obviously these people were unaware of it. Curious, he decided to dress himself in the clothing of the local people and try to learn their language. It was quite a trial for him to discover how to hunt animals in the local fashion, skin them with sharp instruments, and then process them into acceptable forms of clothing, but he succeeded.

The tribe's people were cautious but welcoming to the new stranger who appeared at the edge of their village, dressed in garb that seemed somewhat foreign. The tribe quickly discovered

that he could not speak their language, but within a short time, he had learned enough to get by. He soon became a friend of the village chief.

"Fair day, friend," Si Shim greeted a young woman who was busy grinding wheat on a stone wheel. He was returning from his daily walk into the wilds of the forest, where he secretly recorded information into the computers of his small craft. He'd been in the village for a year now and had learned much.

"And you, sweets, this day was especially quiet without your face," she replied and stopped her grinding to wipe her brow and flash him a broad smile. Her eyes lit up every time they spoke, and secretly she was fascinated by the stranger, subconsciously grooming her clothing and herself to look attractive. She did not know that Si Shim was in love with a young male named Eric of Amesbury, son of the village chief.

He entered his small hut, constructed by his new friends, for he had no skills of his own to offer the tribe, and began reviewing all the artifacts he had gathered. Five funerary pots, three tiny copper knives, sixteen barbed flint arrowheads, a kit for knapping flint, and metalworking tools, including cushion stones that functioned as a kind of portable anvil, and some boar tusks. There were also a black stone wrist-guard and two red wrist-guards, a shale-belt ring, and a pair of gold hair ornaments. Si Shim turned the artifacts over in his hands, studying them, seeking to gain more insight into the mindset of these people.

Eric entered the hut and greeted his lover. "Hello, my friend, I see you still fondle this trash. Why the longing for my father's possessions?"

"I hold a passion for your people, my friend," Si Shim replied as he put the goods into a bag made of animal skin and tucked the bag under his bed.

"I hope your passion includes me," Eric said.

These two played a dangerous game, for it was not acceptable behavior for men to be intimate and even worse for men of such an age difference; Si Shim was twice Eric's age. Si Shim was expected to join with a girl of the tribe to help cement relationships between the tribe of Amesbury and the tribe of Si Shim. But he had other plans. He would return to his own home and take Eric with him.

"With the passing of the new moon, I will be traveling back to my people, my friend. I ask that you take this long walk with me," Si Shim said.

"I would travel the heavens above with you, friend," Eric replied.

"That is good to hear spoken, though heaven is a distant road to travel." Si Shim rose from his small bed, walked over to Eric, and gave him a warm embrace.

The young girl that Si Shim had spoken to earlier, carrying a small snack to entice Si Shim's interest in courtship, appeared at the doorway, only to find the two men in each other's arms.

Shocked and rejected, the girl turned away quietly and decided to speak with Eric's father, the village chieftain. The two men did not notice her arrival or departure.

Later that morning, the village chief, enraged, sent armed men to Si Shim's hut. The two men were dragged before the chief, who had them executed immediately. Two graves were dug near the stone rings of the village and Si Shim, with his treasures scattered about his body, was buried as an Amesbury archer. Eric was buried not far from him, and village life went on, the two men quickly forgotten.

Si Shim's spacecraft sat dormant for several years until the Tasker's programming kicked in, based on Si Shim's probable death since he had not returned for so long. It was time to collect plant samples and human artifacts from other areas of the planet. Soon the craft must return to Alcazaba, when the small black planet did its single orbit of the sun and was closer to Earth than

it would be again for hundreds of years.

Any Tasker could carry out such tasks, for they flew ships to asteroids and planets to mine for materials needed by the Mahouds. Each had in its chest a complex mechanism which directed and controlled it. Thousands of years in the past, when Mahoud left Earth, one of the original robotic guards had been accidentally left behind. A few hundred years before Si Shim reached Earth, the remains of this guard were found by some Greeks. They didn't know what the controlling device was for, but they were inspired by the cogs and wheels to create from it an astronomical calculator. It, too, was lost but eventually found around 1900 in a shipwreck off the island of Antikythera in Greece and therefore called the Antikythera Machine.

The Taskers, even after the improvements made by the Mahouds, were still quite crude compared to what they would someday become, and they moved mechanically, like a wind-up toy. Their 'brains' clicked and beeped, and they had big 'eyes,' which were actually windows for sensors. Their arms ended in primitive pincers.

A few days later the Tasker landed on a windless desert plateau in Peru, near a village which looked deserted. It emerged from the ship and began moving toward the huts. However, the village of Nazca was not deserted.

People began running out of the huts, picking up stones as they raced toward the Tasker. The Tasker had no commands to deal with this kind of movement, but when people began attacking and the first stone struck its chest, the robot simply turned around, got back into the spaceship, and left.

The natives stared at the silvery bullet shape of the spaceship rising into the blue sky. As it disappeared over the horizon, the shaman fell to his knees and shouted, "It was a god! We have offended a god! We must atone and make offering so he will come back and bless us."

They atoned for a good long time. Over hundreds of years, they drew pictures in the desert by removing the red pebbles and uncovering the whitish ground beneath. These hundreds of shallow lines ranged in complexity from simple geometric designs to figures of hummingbirds, spiders, fish, lizards, flowers, and trees. The artists worked in an area that encompassed a hundred and ninety square miles, and the largest figures were eight hundred feet long.

Despite this impressive effort, the god did not come back. Instead, it flew north to pre-Olmec territory in south central Mexico and landed at the edge of a village. This time, however, its appearance did not result in an attack.

The Tasker walked into the middle of a fight between two clans over the ownership of a heavy rubber ball, a new artifact to the area. The robot picked up the ball and examined it, while the terrified fighters knelt or lay on the ground, some of them covering their eyes.

When the Tasker finished his inspection, he tossed the heavy ball to a kneeling fighter. It fell through the man's paralyzed fingers. The Tasker picked it up again and threw it to the opposing group, trying to discover what use they made of the peculiar object. This man also dropped the ball. Because nothing interesting was happening, the Tasker's programming caused it to move on to the next task.

But the actions of this sky god resulted, as the years passed, in the practice of having ball games to settle disputes, which eventually became a sport that was popular well into the twenty-first century. The god's appearance also resulted in the practice of carving giant heads wearing what looked like helmets, a flawed representation of the Tasker head.

Soon the spaceship rose skyward again, and the Tasker went on with his visits to various parts of Earth and the collection of plants and artifacts. Unfortunately, on its last visit, to the pyramids of Egypt, it did not leave quickly enough to escape the angry attacks of a local tribe.

Their spears and clubs damaged the mechanism in its chest so that some programming was destroyed.

The Tasker managed to pilot the ship out into space but the commands for steering to Mahoud were lost. The spaceship wandered the solar system for nearly four thousand years before smashing into Alcazaba, killing many, many hundreds of its inhabitants.

Such was the beginning and end for humanity on Earth. The people of Alcazaba had lost all their records of space travel in a fire shortly after the ship headed for Earth and thus they had long forgotten the mission on which they had sent Si Shim. The ship appeared to them only as a representative from Earth, a missile of destruction, fired upon them with no justification.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Yes, we've talked about myths before and this is how such stories began, for the Peruvians and the Olmec, as well as for other areas in the world where this one solitary Tasker landed. The myths passed down through time in many cultures may well have a common origin story of the Tasker and his ship.

It's true, Reader, there are connections everywhere. It's possible that Charger R/T, as he was ricocheting all over the timeline of the galaxy, trying to find and kill Abarth, may have arrived on Earth at different times and unknowingly created myths as well.

Why do humans create myths? Oh, I don't know, it's just the way we are. Or the way they are, since I'm not sure I qualify as human anymore.

No, I know that's not an answer. Let's say that humans tend to be event-driven. Some utterly strange event, like a spaceship landing, fires the neurons in their brains to create an explanation that makes sense in their particular culture, some new and interesting story. Something to wow their kids with.

Is it because the planet was hollow that Si Shim's spaceship killed so many people?

Yes, exactly. The crust was fragile, and the shock of the impact of the spaceship was felt, literally, throughout that black world.

Now we're moving ahead to 2030 and war. I will relate this story through the eyes of some humans who were involved in the beginning and one in particular, who was closer to uncovering the mysteries of the past than he knew.

Chapter 6 Trouble at Gobekli Tepe

"You should not be here!" the black-robed pastor roared at Dr. Harold Opinhimmer, the lead scientist in charge of the dig site of ancient Gobekli Tepe in Turkey. The place had existed for over 12,000 years and Opinhimmer could see that it had been deliberately reburied sometime in the past.

The pastor and his large group of followers looked over-dressed for the heat of the day and the bottoms of their robes were stained brown with desert sand. "That site was buried for a reason, and it was not meant to be dug up again. We thought we made that perfectly clear when the archaeological team from the University of Chicago was here in the 1960s." The pastor was red in the face and sweating.

Dr. Opinhimmer muttered, "But now it's 2030 and science has advanced a long way in nearly seventy years." He was only too aware of his own advanced age and frailty as he saw the mob grow more hostile. It looked to be nearly out of control when the Turkish police arrived at the main gates. Opinhimmer heaved a sigh of relief and told the police that he wanted the dissidents removed from the property. Again.

The enraged mob surged toward the gates as the few police officers tried to disperse them. Too late, Opinhimmer saw the rock flying toward him. A searing pain blazed through his head, and he tumbled to the ground. When he regained his senses, he found himself being carried by two of his students back into the safety of the compound behind the protective gates.

When he could stand again, the old man brushed off his dirty, creased chinos and yelled through the gate, "You are all mad! Why do people like you haunt archaeologists? What do you and your church have to hide?"

He heard no intelligible answer. He and his students retreated further into the encampment to let the police deal with the unruly religious zealots. It was becoming a daily ritual now for the police to call for back-up. More vehicles had arrived, swelling the numbers defending the front gates.

"What did he mean, Professor, about burying Gobekli Tepe for a reason?" a young girl student asked.

"Pay no attention to his words," Opinhimmer said as he leaned on the two students helping him walk. "People who are so passionate in their ideologies often make little sense. Those people out there are no worse than the lunatics who write to me that aliens from space were responsible for burying this place."

"Aliens?" a Soviet student asked. "Really?"

"Yes, really, aliens." He did not want to talk, for his head throbbed and his arthritic knees were complaining about his fall. But he owed his students whatever knowledge he had. "I make it a point to read every letter I receive. The most recent was from an American group stating that aliens came to Earth after the last ice age to help early man build this site. Such nonsense!" He had little tolerance for what he deemed stupidity. "If aliens with advanced technologies did come to this place, why would they help primitive humans pile rocks in circles? Let me ask this – have you ever helped a wasp build its nest, or invited cockroaches into your home by creating small holes in your walls for them?"

His students made no answer; perhaps they had none. Or they were in awe of his reputation. He knew he was regarded as one of the world's most respected scientists, and certainly he had

published many treatises on a variety of subjects over the years. Now he was content to concentrate on Earth's ancient history, though at times like this he wished it was a more peaceful task.

Dr. Opinhimmer went on. "It is clear to me that early humans were organized into groups, and that they were intelligent enough to create these magnificent structures on their own. We should not be so quick to assume that primitive people were incapable of thinking in abstract terms."

"But, sir, I read a paper you wrote back in 1990 about the church and aliens. Didn't you suggest that aliens might be responsible for the rise of religions all over the world?" The young Soviet student sounded puzzled.

"My God, that's forty years ago!" Opinhimmer paused. "One of the benefits of old age is that you gain wisdom. And since when did you become so smart? Reading my early papers, are you trying to get a better grade?" Dr. Opinhimmer laughed as he reached over and rubbed the student's head. "Yes, it is true that I wrote those things. I studied religion for a number of years at my old university, much to the annoyance of my scientific peers. My friends from the theological faculty and I spent many a long night arguing about spiritual matters. I also read many articles on the alien contacts supposed to have occurred throughout time. I found little factual evidence for those claims."

He was now caught up in his memories and eager to continue. "And, if you had read the entire paper, you would know that I found little or no evidence that aliens were responsible for the rise of religion. Instead, I suggested that the notion of alien intervention in human affairs could not be proved nor disproved and should remain a null topic until we discover more evidence. Anything else is just pure speculation."

The group arrived at the meal tent and, after getting coffee and a snack, everyone sat around a large table. Another of the students said, "So this group that keeps appearing at our gates thinks the site was buried for a reason?"

Opinhimmer took a deep breath. "Yes. I received letters from these people informing me that they planned to protest our work here. They believe that this site was first constructed after the Ark mentioned in the Bible came to rest on Mount Ararat a few miles from here. But this is just more nonsense!" He waved his hand in dismissal. "There is no evidence that the Ark ever existed, nor that it came to rest here, nor that there was ever a flood in this region, nor that this site has any type of religious implications. Actually, this place seems to have rather more in common with aliens than it does with religion."

"But how can you deny the existence of aliens and yet say this site seems alien?" asked a young East Indian girl.

Opinhimmer held his coffee cup between his hands. "The beauty of good science is that it never makes the arrogant claim that it has all the answers. Any answer is only relevant for a day because tomorrow new evidence may overturn it." He liked his students to decide for themselves if his answers were logical. "Unlike religion, which claims to have an answer for everything, science admits that it is faced with a conundrum here. Yes, this site is close to the so-called holy lands, but it appears very different in construction and purpose from similar sites."

He leaned back in his chair and pushed his long graying hair away from his face. "The carved figures on the upright stones have nothing to do with religious behavior, such as depicting animals chosen for the mythical Ark, nor do they represent domesticated livestock. Instead, celestial navigation seems to be the design. The lack of tools in the area suggests that the site was finished, cleaned up, and then used in some practical way."

"The problem reminds me of the Shirgir Idol that I studied in Russia," the Soviet student remarked. "It dates to 11,000 years ago, nearly as ancient as the upright stones we see every day. Amazing to think it's twice as old as the Egyptian pyramids."

"Has anyone discovered the meaning of the symbols carved on it?" Opinhimmer asked. "Apparently scientists believe the runes are a code, possibly about the origins of the universe. Although the code could be about almost anything."

The Soviet student shook his head. "It's still a mystery, the last I heard."

Opinhimmer fell silent for a time, gathering his thoughts. The students who spent their summer holidays helping him remove the soil covering ancient stones were some of the brightest and best from all over the world. The dig site was hot and dusty and plagued by flies, and the protestors made the job very frustrating. However, the work was considered to be of value to humanity, and so, every year for the past ten years, students from universities made their way to Turkey to dig up a site that seemed to have been deliberately buried 12,000 years before by primitive cave-dwelling humans.

He went on. "The construction dates back to the end of the ice age. I must remind you that as the glaciers retreated, they left the area wet and fertile. It would have been a good hunting place, covered with trees, wild fruits, and berries. In this knowledge lies the problem. These peoples had no agriculture; they were hunter-gatherers. Learning about the equinoxes through celestial study would have served no function. Hence the possibility does exist that this site was designed with or by aliens."

The East Indian student rubbed her temples and asked, "So one group of people believes our work here is of religious significance and another group believes it's a site dedicated to aliens?"

"It's much worse than that." Opinhimmer's tone was heavy. "The north site you were working on the other day, where I called you to stop? There was a reason I did that." The silence lasted for a moment. "We found something there, something that suggests the mythical city of Atlantis might not be such a myth."

The students looked disbelieving. He could have heard a pin drop.

"The map of a city is carved on one of the stone monoliths. It is portrayed as being on a large land mass, with roads and waterways clearly defined, but on a scale that was epic compared to the size and shape we think of as Atlantis." He reached for the atlas that lay at the end of the table. "The map suggests that this was the world of Atlantis..." he pointed his finger "...here, from Athens across the water to Izmir in Turkey and back across to the island of Crete. History has been looking for an island with a city, but these stones suggest that it was a huge land mass, ringed by mountains, not water, cutting the rest of the world off from contact except for a few river pathways out. There is only one city from history which matches that description. Plato's Atlantis. So, I ask you, was this place buried 12,000 years ago, or 2,000 years ago?"

"You think the church buried it?" asked a student.

"When I researched this site many years ago, I found that it had been dismissed as a burial area, and the university told to abandon it." Dr. Opinhimmer leaned back again. "Imagine a world where a great race of people existed, long before the last ice age had even started. Imagine that they were far advanced in technology and understood space travel. Let us also say they knew the ice age was fast approaching. They launched themselves from their cities into space to find a safe new world and escape the ice that would eventually have killed them all."

He took a sip of his coffee. It was cold now, but he was too excited about the map on the stone monolith to care. "Suppose, though, that a group stayed on Earth, survived the ice age and built ancient sites like Gobekli Tepe, with nothing more to go on than stories of times past,

stories of Atlantis? War, famine, and time erased all traces of Atlantis until Plato rediscovered it." He rose and paced back and forth, the way he used to do in the lecture room. "Then the church, realizing the knowledge revealed by Gobekli Tepe threatened their hold on power, decided to bury the site and redirect everyone's attention to a story of a flood and Mount Ararat."

"So Atlantis really existed?" asked a student after a long pause.

"Most traces of that time were ground under gigantic ice sheets, and only these outposts survive. I expect we will find more places like Tepe soon." The pain in his knees forced him to sit down again. "What really fascinates me is the discovery of the Red Deer cave people in China. These humans are so different from what has been discovered about other hominids of that time that they might almost be a separate species. They didn't seem to interact with the other people of 12,000 years ago. They apparently stuck mostly to themselves. So, I ask you, could these have been the descendants of the mythical Atlantis?"

The students all had puzzled looks, which amused him. They were finding it difficult to keep up with his thinking.

"These Red Deer cave people found in China could easily be a race of xenophobic humans who wanted nothing to do with the other groups of people." He tapped his index finger on the table surface. "I would contend that any group of advanced humans left on Earth, after others of their kind rocketed off into space, would want very little to do with people they might perceive as primitives."

Another young female student spoke. "So this place was not built by aliens, but may have been built to commemorate humans who left Earth behind and thus became aliens. But where did they go?"

"I'm not sure I'm right," Opinhimmer said. He didn't want to mislead the students into thinking he had all the answers. "I have no idea where they would have gone, or if they even existed. We need to research more of the site before we can have any hope of a real answer. Nevertheless, I will add this little piece of information. I have a colleague who was working on Stonehenge a few years back and made a startling discovery. I'm sure you have all heard of Nicola Tesla; he did work on the properties of electricity traveling great distances through wireless transmission. Well, it turns out that my friend in Britain came across some old writings in the basement of one of the museums and, after much study, found that Stonehenge was thought to be a type of electrical transmitter."

"Wow, Professor, this is really getting out there," said a student with a disbelieving expression.

Dr. Opinhimmer continued, hoping to shore up his argument. "What made it all conceivable was the discovery of what were thought to be mistakes in the construction of Stonehenge. My colleague found additional pits or small potholes that were assumed to be there for locking mechanisms for the upright stones, but were found on the opposite side of the cap stones from where they should have been." He wrapped his hands around his coffee cup to stop himself waving his hands around like a lecturer. "What he discovered, according to this old manuscript, was that if one poured a mixture of mercury and other dissimilar liquid metals into the pits of a completed Stonehenge circle, and those holes were at certain angles, in an electrical storm the stone circle created static electricity in huge arcs, much like a Tesla coil."

He noted with satisfaction that the students were all sitting on the edge of their seats.

"The combination of the dissimilar liquefied metals creates a weak electrical charge, and the sarsen stones are thought to give a resonance or a tone that is transmittable. The static was so severe that the people observing the process were safe only if they stationed themselves in

another enclosure made of wood, situated a few miles away but close enough that they could still watch."

"So what good was that machine to primitive Britons?" a student asked. Her face reflected what was probably an inner struggle between believing his story and trying for scientific detachment.

"That's the million-dollar question!" Dr. Opinhimmer exclaimed. His excitement made his voice gruff. "We don't know. But here in Tepe, the north circle of stones, with the carving of the ringed city, seems to be built in the same manner. So why bury the site? Is there scientific importance to this area? Would the church want this type of knowledge concealed from the public?"

He realized that staring into his mug was not going to produce hot coffee. He rose and poured a fresh cup. "This dig site is a gathering of concentric circles, like a grouping of mini Stonehenges." Sitting down again, he continued. "What if this site is a transceiver, a way to communicate with those ancient humans who left Earth before the last ice age? And what if Stonehenge is a recreation of that lost technology?"

"I've got to be honest with you, Professor," said one of his more ardent students. "A group of stone rings doesn't sound like any type of usable technology. If this society of humans lived and thrived on Earth before the last ice age, and somehow gained space travel, a group of rocks is not consistent with the types of technology needed for such an advanced people. And to suggest that this group of rocks transmits anything seems unrealistic. Any sounds given off by ringing stones in a thunderstorm would be drowned out by the thunder. And, in any case, would the sound be loud enough to transmit out into deep space?"

The professor shouted, "I like you!" He was pleased with the student's interest. "You are quite correct in this line of thinking, with only one exception. My hypothetical ancient human society was great in technology 20,000 years ago, before the last ice age started, but would have been utterly erased from existence by Earth processes. The survivors left behind would have had no technology to help them survive that span of time but would have retained language. That means stories and history."

He took a breath and continued. "This group of transmitting stones may be just their imaginative recreation of what the ancient humans had, but skewed as stories always are when passed down through time."

Some of his students nodded.

"My friend who worked on Stonehenge has created a computer model based on this line of reasoning, and he has concluded that the stone machine with its rare metals and high voltage does indeed give off a tone. However, a recent and more exciting discovery made by a dredging ship just off the coast of Porthcawl, in the Bristol Channel, was another stone ring. This ring is similar to our Gobekli Tepe site and has been dated to around the time of the ice age. It is also covered by mounds of sand, now deep beneath the ocean waters."

Dr. Opinhimmer glanced around the table and saw that all the students seemed to now agree with him. He was positive that this site was of scientific importance and had to be a direct threat to the church. That there might have been a technologically superior race of humans before the writings of religion, and yet not mentioned in those writings would indeed create turmoil in an already fragile and endangered church.

He continued to explain his reasoning. "The real problem here is that 12,000 years back, when this site of concentric stone rings existed, science tells us that the area would still have been under a thick sheet of ice. So, if the dating we used is correct, then this site was built as

soon as the ice retreated. But it makes more sense to guess that this area was instead an oasis. A lush, thick, forested, tropical area surrounded by ice."

Hours had passed since he and his students had hidden themselves away in the small tent. He noticed that the stars were now shining and suggested that they move outside to enjoy the cool evening air.

The group gathered around a fire pit, lit a fire, and continued the debate. One of the students asked, "So what does this all mean, Professor? Are we working on a site that might change the course of human history?"

"I can't say. This whole conversation has been an exercise in thought," the professor replied. "But I can add this to the mix. About two years back, I read a paper on the discovery of human remains in Florida that were dated at around 20,000 years old."

"I read that paper too," said a student. "But it was thought to be too problematic and so was dismissed."

"We don't need to debate the politics of scientific discoveries here," Dr. Opinhimmer said. "But what was found with the human remains is definitely problematic. This human was found with a degraded piece of metal that might have been used as a knife. Metal was not used until much later in human history, and when the supposed knife itself was tested, suggested something disturbing. It seems the metal was a blending of compounds, much like that of old Japanese Samurai swords." He was getting tired now. He wanted to stop speaking and let his mind drift. The students were silent, perhaps working hard to process all the information he had offered them.

The silence was disturbed by a tall, thin-faced man who slipped from darkness into the light of the campfire. It was one of the dig site managers. He pulled the professor aside from the group around the fire. "You have been recalled to the university. Apparently, the Dean wants a personal update on our progress. You will be leaving tomorrow, so you better pack your gear."

Dr. Opinhimmer grudgingly headed toward his tent, the students groaning and protesting that the conversation had ended too abruptly. He agreed, but what could he do about it? No doubt the Dean also wanted to discuss the continuing demonstrations by members of the church. That institution's tendrils reached everywhere.

Chapter 7 Descent into hell

For the first time in years, Brother Ben dressed in what he called civvies: tattered jeans, tee shirt, black leather jacket. He placed the rest of his clothing in the small suitcase, ran his hands over the black garments to ensure they lay flat and smooth, closed the case, and looked around his room. He had lived a happy and comfortable life here these past fifteen years, but the old manuscripts discovered underneath the monastery conflicted strongly with the truths he had held so dear. Moving the small crucifix across the shelf, closer to the light beaming in through the little window, Ben sighed and turned to leave the room for the last time.

His mentor and friend, Father Mulcahy, was waiting for him in the hall. "I wish you would change your mind," he said, placing his hand on Ben's shoulder.

"I just can't, Father. I tried to be strong in my faith in God, but as I transcribed those manuscripts, I found it increasingly difficult to abide by the rules you laid out for me." Ben's voice was full of sorrow for this was the hardest thing he had ever had to do. The church had been wrong in choosing him to transcribe the ancient documents, but he had promised never to reveal what he had learned, for fear of damaging the already tarnished reputation of the church. If ever the truth was known in the larger world, the work done by many committed people over the centuries would all be in vain.

Ben tried to dismiss those pages as the work of a madman, just a fringe writer bent on finding some way to get his work into the Bible. But, as more and more work surfaced through the internet, work done by others with nothing to gain, Ben realized he had interpreted the most important pages ever produced regarding the story of Enoch.

"Maybe I was too hard on you, too demanding. I blame myself for this, but I truly felt that, of all my students, you were the brightest and that this was the work God had planned for you," Father Mulcahy said as they walked down the long, dark hall. His tall staff clicking on the stone floor, Father Mulcahy went on. "God has chosen a new path for you to walk, and I pray He will keep you safe all the days of your life, my friend. If you ever need anything, I will always be here for you."

"Thank you, Father. God keep you safe, too." Ben stepped through the great doors of the monastery and went out into the world alone.

As he waited for the taxi to take him to the airport and a new life, his mind once again returned to the manuscript. The book of Enoch told of a man who walked with God for several years and, to Ben, the story had always been just that, a story. The Bible had dedicated only a single paragraph to Enoch. However, works had surfaced since, telling of the adventures of Enoch, the only individual to ever have the honor of getting to know God. But the pages that Ben transcribed told a different story, the story of Enoch's origins, the fact that he was not one individual, but thousands, descriptions of the city they dwelt in and how it came to be that they had discovered the technology to contact God.

This new book of Enoch told of men who walked with God for three hundred years. Ben saw this long-lost knowledge as something the world should know, but he had been given strict orders never to reveal it. He had spent a long time transcribing the works of departed monks who had worked on the stories earlier. Each generation of scribes slowly deciphered the words found on strange, triangular tablets made from a metal that seemed modern yet which he now knew must have survived for hundreds of thousands of years. Six months ago, he had cracked the code.

The code told of a machine the Enoch had built, which was of such incredible design and such unbelievable complexity that the whole thing seemed to border on madness. Its structure and workings were incomprehensible. But it was clearly technology, clearly a machine, built in a time before the rise of modern man. Who were the people of the Enochs' city, where did they live, how did they live? These questions kept Ben awake night after night. But the one item that completely devastated Ben's belief in the church he had so loved was the description of the keystone, a machine that was used to talk to God.

The keystone required a living human being, a child, to give up his life to activate the science of this machine. What kind of God could demand the life of an innocent, autistic child as payment for contacting him? It was obvious to Ben that the Enoch had built a murderous machine.

Ben had tried to discuss his findings with Father Mulcahy. "But I tell you, this is what it says. There can be no mistake!" Ben, at his desk in a small, cramped room, deep below the monastery, a room filled to the ceiling with old books and manuscripts, was holding a small triangular tablet.

"It can't be," Father Mulcahy replied as he turned one of the other tablets round and round in his hands. "Brother Sebastian, before you, cracked the code and told a different story."

"Brother Sebastian was using a polyalphabetic cipher from the 1970s, and he thought the language was just that, a language. It's not!" Ben said, hoping his friend and mentor would understand the difference.

"Look, let me try to explain this again." Ben took the tablet from Father Mulcahy. He placed the two pieces together at their base, creating a diamond, then added a third to the tip of one end. Ben then moved the single triangular tablet from one point to the other point as he ran through the words one at a time. "You see here; the thing needs to be moved as one reads it. That's because these beings didn't write words down on a flat piece of paper like us. We write in only one dimension. They lived in four dimensions, and so you have to move the tablets in order to read them. It's not in code. The code is in how you move the tablets to read them."

Father Mulcahy looked perplexed. "So how do you know how to move the tablets?"

"Each surface of these tablets is one dimension. To use them, they have to be moved as one might move through four dimensions. The words on each surface are only a part of the sentence. You have to take a word from one side of one tablet, and then move to the surface of the next tablet and so on to make a sentence." Ben tried to replicate the movements. "Near as I can tell, and according to what I have begun to understand from these tablets, the beings who wrote this are the ones the Bible called angels."

Father Mulcahy, disconcerted, asked, "So you are saying we have angel tablets?"

"Well, I guess so," Ben had replied.

"You cannot talk with anyone about this," Father Mulcahy had said firmly. "I will have to contact the pope directly with the information. If it should be learned that we hold actual tablets written by angels, this could cause unthinkable chaos."

"What it means," Ben had replied as he carefully touched the triangular tablet on his desk, "is that the Enoch were angels."

As Ben left behind the gates of the monastery and the title of 'Brother' for the last time and climbed into the cab that would take him to the airport, the burdens of sadness and knowledge he bore welled up. Finally, he shed tears for mankind. The taxi driver stopped staring at Ben in the rear-view mirror, deciding a chat wouldn't be appreciated, and instead focused on driving Ben to the city.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Yes, I thought you would be curious. I will explain the history behind what Brother Ben found in those triangular tablets. He did not know the half of it.

The people who created the tablets were called Enoch, also known as the First Ones. We've talked about them before. They were descendants of humans who lived on the plains of Africa about a million years ago and were genetically modified by the Grays for use as servants but escaped.

It was the Enoch who built an empire nearly 700,000 years ago. Of course, their creations were ground under the glaciers of ice ages, lost forever to the later human explorers, but were more advanced than anyone before our own time could have imagined. However, they created three huge mega structures which survived. One was in Egypt, buried deep beneath the Sphinx and the shifting sands. The second was in Britain, buried under Stonehenge. The last was buried under the city of Dhuusamareeb, Somalia. This last site had no magnificent surface structure to pinpoint its location, but for anyone who cared to look, the outline could be found on maps. Under a great rectangular sand clearing, just to the east of the city and easily seen from the air, was the entrance to that lost complex.

The Mahouds? Yes, Reader, the Mahouds were a breakaway group from the First ones which settled Atlantis and eventually, using antigravity devices, went into space and found Alcazaba. They were technologically very advanced, but they never became four-dimensional, like the rest of the First Ones.

In the strange triangular tablets that Ben spoke of, the First Ones told stories of their encounters with the Grays, alien beings with immense power and intelligence. The First Ones had progressed through the Stone, Iron, Industrial, and Technological Ages, and were in the Energy Age when they came into contact with the Grays again. The Age of Energy was a point in their development where the corporeal form, in which living had meant being trapped forever inside the walls of their three cities, gave way to existence as a type of energy.

The First Ones were then able to manifest themselves in whatever form they chose. If they wanted to appear as human, they could bend light to create a pleasing form. If they chose to reveal themselves as dogs, they would bend light to be that form, or they could travel the world undetected. They had achieved this ability thanks in part to the genetic manipulation of the Grays, who had encoded hominid DNA that, in the twenty-first century, was referred to as junk DNA. They simply outgrew their bodily forms, because intellectually they had expanded well beyond the necessity for such physical support. Their intelligence would be forever contained in their three cities as ghosts, but their technology allowed them to travel anywhere physically as light.

Ben, you see, had discovered the existence of the first fourth-dimensional beings, human beings that now existed at all points of time and space.

Those triangular metal tablets provided evidence, for the first time, that a type of science predated religion, and that religion had used this science when a certain pope sanctioned it.

Deep in the heartland of modern Turkey lay the remains of a complex called Gobekli Tepe. The church had this dug up in 1725 CE and reactivated in order to speak with God. The response they got was less than desirable, but Ben knew nothing of this, only that the church was aware of the Enochs' work. Father Mulcahy knew of the church's work and knew of the results of using

the ancient machine to speak with God.

Father Mulcahy had heard about the church team which stopped the exploration of Gobekli Tepe in the 1960s and he was one of only a few church scientists who read the accounts of Pope Clement XI's actions. He knew of the alien who had been contacted that fall morning in 1725, knew that the pope had spoken to the alien and, when the conversation ended, gave the order to bury the temple. He knew that the pope had described the God he met as a cold, calculating, reptilian beast, not a loving God. Pope Clement XI went mad shortly thereafter.

A fitting end, you say? Well, perhaps. Perhaps not. But certainly not surprising.

We could talk more on that subject, but it's time I told you about the war. We don't have a lot of time. But now, at least, you can easily understand humanity's clash with space and extraterrestrials.

Even better, Charger is about to join the military and start causing things to happen.



The next day Ben boarded a flight that would take him from Istanbul to Seattle in the western United States. His seat companion turned out to be a frail-looking old man with long gray hair, wearing the creased pants and shirt of a workman.

"I'm Professor Opinheimer," the old man said. "I've been working on a dig in southeast Turkey."

Ben didn't want to talk about the monastery, though it was in Anatolia and probably close to the professor's dig, nor about his own work and his grief over leaving it. "I'm traveling," he said. "Just call me Ben."

"You're Australian," said the professor.

"I guess we never lose the accent."

Given the flight was going to be a long one, nearly seventeen hours, Ben hoped to catch some sleep, but the professor apparently felt like talking.

"I don't want to go home," he said. "But I want to see my nephew, Danny. I like that boy; he has a head on his shoulders. I just wish he'd use it. But my half-brother never used his, so perhaps it's genetic."

"Families are always problematic," Ben offered, already bored.

But the professor's mind had wandered elsewhere. "I taught astrophysics for many years and all during that time, I thought about retiring and trekking off to Turkey. I'd read about formations that hinted at extraordinary knowledge waiting to be found and I wanted to be the one who found it." Dr. Opinheimer paused. "Besides, I thought a career in archaeology might be nice. More peaceful than teaching."

It might be more peaceful, Ben thought, but one would also have to endure dust and flies and the great grinding heat of the desert. Perhaps the old boy doesn't notice.

"You know," said the professor, "The church holds back advances in knowledge but now that society is turning away from religion, we're rushing headlong into technological chaos. There is a staggering amount of pollution on our fragile world today, factories, transportation, growing technology, all capable of destroying us. But the biggest problem is the rapidly growing number of humans breathing today. Remember, in goes the good air, out comes the bad."

"You have a bleak take on humanity," Ben said. If he were honest, though, his own take wasn't much more cheerful, now that the church's betrayal had caused him to lose faith in the future.

"Maybe I'm just old and fretful," the professor said, pulling the fingers of one hand through his tangled gray hair, "but I fear for the younger generation. We humans live in a world of choices, but few of us ever take responsibility for our decisions. It will only take one misstep and something even as infinitesimally small as a virus could be the death of all humanity."

Do I care? Ben wondered. But the professor was off and running again.

The old man leaned forward and rubbed his hands together. "Here, I will cheer us up by looking at the big picture, at the universe, which is immortal. First, to gain true understanding, we must discard the 'many worlds' theory and, instead, realize that a universe is just an evolution of particles expanding in time and space, which always exist."

The church said nothing about time and space, except that it was bounded by God. And could the church be believed?

Not anymore.

"It's really quite simple," said the professor. "There is only one universe in existence. How it works is like a lake that has a rock thrown into it, which sends out ripples that fade, while new ripples are forming. My theory is called the two-state universe or duality complex system."

"That's wild," Ben said. "I'm not sure I understand, though."

"When I was teaching," the professor said, "I would explain it this way. I'd draw a circle on the chalk board and say: 'Imagine a child's balloon. You fill it with air and, as it expands, you have a representation of one universe, say a positive universe, where everything exists in a positive-toward-negative charge state.' Then I would draw a second circle inside the first and say, 'Now you insert a second balloon inside the first and begin to expand it with air. This is the formation of the second state, a place of negative-toward-positive charge state.'" He peered at Ben. "Are you with me now?"

"I think so."

The professor smiled wryly. "I hope you are. Only my brightest students would sit still and listen to me. The rest of them were more interested in frat parties, or just getting away from the sound of my voice droning on."

With seventeen hours to kill, he might as well listen to the old man. Besides, this theory of a dual universe sounded interesting.

"All right. Then I would draw a third circle inside the second circle. When civilization ignites a 'big bang' event, we find that a third balloon is created. A third balloon cannot exist, however; so what happens is that all the matter from the outermost balloon is forced, through the explosion, into the empty space created by the third balloon, thus always creating the two in-balance universe states, one of light, one of dark, one positive, one negative, one of matter, one of antimatter. This continues infinitely, for the two universe states are always in balance, like yin and yang."

"I see," Ben prompted. What the professor said seemed logical, but whether it was true, he had no way of judging. He had never studied science. Only faith, which was dead. "But wouldn't a big bang happen naturally?"

The professor shook his head. "No, it would have to be a civilization which caused it, for nothing in our universe could naturally cause that type of event. Only meddling fingers and minds could create this type of catastrophe. That is why I believe CERN, The European Organization for Nuclear Research, should have been stopped."

"But I thought CERN was a good thing," Ben protested. "Doesn't it use particle accelerators and high energy to experiment with particles? Isn't it probing the fundamental nature of the universe?"

"Oh yes, it's doing all of that. But humanity must come to understand that at some point in the future, it will inevitably discover the ability to ignite another big bang event. In our hurry to learn the mysteries of the cosmos, we may inadvertently discover the pin on the hand grenade of existence, and rush blindly into disaster."

Ben found himself inexplicably shivering. Then he forced himself back to calmness. They were flying to the United States, an ordinary sort of thing to do, and tomorrow he would be searching for work where his talent at research might be useful. In the meantime, this conversation was better than worrying about his future. "But we don't know that there is life on other planets, and we can't see another universe."

"Do you have any idea how enormous this universe is?" the professor said sharply. "Even with our sophisticated telescopes, we can see only a little." He paused for a moment. "When we look through the Hubble telescope toward the center of the universe, we see the light from the big bang we live in, an explosion caused by a civilization so advanced that they had the ability – through creation or mistake – to restart the universe, but in its opposite charge."

"I wish we could see more," Ben said. Oddly enough, he did wish that. Perhaps because he was freeing himself from the bounds and prejudices of the church.

"So do I. If we had a magic spaceship to travel to the center of our universe, we'd find a negative universe forming, one we couldn't survive in because we would be the antimatter. And, if we traveled outward to the rim of our visible universe, we would again encounter the negative universe and again be annihilated. But we might see that negative universe shrinking, or receding into the formation of the new universe being created at the center of our known universe."

"I'd go up in your magic spaceship," Ben said. "I'd be scared shitless but I'd go. I'd like to see what's really there."

"And what you would see," said the professor, "is that both universes look the same since both are just a formation of particles. But our instruments would find the place of opposite-charge particles. The idea that we exist on a membrane in a multiverse is almost right. But instead, we live inside the expanding balloon and the membrane is the edge of the expanding universe we occupy."

Ben nodded. "If you say so. It sounds plausible. But I don't think my brain is capable of comprehending the vastness of space. To me, Earth is almost too big to comprehend."

The professor nodded. "I understand. So, I will finish my little lecture the way I always did for my students. Our universe is one of only two that can ever exist. We are simple humans living in a world of opposing forces, tugging at our very existence. Thanks to science and human curiosity, we rush into a future that we can't predict, which may be bright or may cause our demise. And, thanks to religion, we live in a world that stagnates our ability to think, our ability to grow."

The professor fell silent for a few moments, then said, "Do you follow football?"

Relieved that he could let his mind relax, Ben said, "A bit."

The conversation was confined after that to sports and the weather in Turkey, interspersed with naps and the occasional stroll up and down the aisle to stretch his muscles. In spite of that, Ben was feeling very stiff and tired and looking forward to disembarking. He was sure the professor, with his old bones, felt much worse.

The pilot made an announcement. "Attention, passengers, we have been asked to land at Los Angeles International airport rather than SeaTac in Washington. There is no reason for concern, and arrangements will be made for all passengers to be sent to their respective destinations as quickly as possible after we touch down."

Conversations resumed among the passengers up and down the aisles. No one seemed concerned about the situation.

Then the plane shuddered, suddenly banked sharply, and dropped like a stone toward the ground. Passengers screamed as it pitched and rolled. A flash of intense light burst past the windows, followed by several loud booms. The plane shook and rattled violently. It pitched up, then plunged straight down, spiraling as parts of the hull and the wings broke off. Several seats, with people strapped into them, tore loose, and tumbled out into the sky.

The pilot managed to correct the plane's descent just long enough to belly-land the stricken craft on a farm field, spraying the air with dirt and debris. Like a held breath, there was silence for a moment. Then came the whimpers, sobs, and panic-stricken screams.

When Ben came to, he found that he and the old professor were still strapped into their seats together, and had been thrown some fifty feet from the wreckage. Struggling to disentangle themselves, they discovered they had survived with no injuries beyond a few bruises. Finally, free, they set out to help as many of the others as they could. It did not take long for Ben to realize that the disaster was far from being over. In the distance, thunder rang out, and though the skies were clear, it seemed to be drawing closer.

"Dear God, what the hell is that?" Ben cried, gasping in horror.

Across the fields, what looked like many small tornados dotted the horizon, and a dark greenish mist rolled across the ground toward them like a blinding desert dust storm. Wicked streaks of light flashed from the mist, darting in every direction. Even more unbelievable, between the plane's survivors and the impending storm, were hundreds and hundreds of cars and trucks rushing along the road near the downed plane in a desperate attempt to escape.

Many failed. The tornados swept up cars, trucks, and the people inside them, and whirled all into oblivion. Where the crowd was thickest, a large, jagged spike burst upward from the ground to about sixty feet in height. People scattered to get away from the spike, but they had only gained perhaps twenty feet when the thing was activated. Hooks attached to tentacles shot out from the spike and struck fleeing people in the back. Thirty or more humans were thus instantly paralyzed, and the spike began spinning clockwise, drawing the victims back toward the rotating machine. With the victims drawn up tight to the spike, it gave a shudder and plunged back into the ground.

The survivors around the wreckage of the plane now left the wounded where they lay and bolted, hoping to escape the onslaught. Ben and the professor helped a couple of women as they made their way, running and tripping, toward a town that lay on the other side of the fields.

Darting all around the four, as they fled, were thin steel rods, seemingly self-controlled, flashing through the air and destroying everything they crashed through, vehicles as well as people.

The professor called out, "Here, inside this tavern!"

They struggled desperately to get inside, while around them, cracks opened up in the streets. The two women hesitated, staggered as if off balance, and were sucked into the ground. Only Ben and the professor made it into the tavern.



Ben had already decided that the only sensible thing to do was hide and he didn't object when the professor tugged him into a broom closet at the back of the tavern. If the strange weapons couldn't see them, perhaps they would stay safe.

Dr. Opinhimmer kept talking. Ben didn't pay much attention. He was trying to move stuff out of the way and pull the door of the closet shut.

The old professor finally shouted, "I don't think you understand what I am saying here! If I die, so do all the people of this world. I am the linchpin, the fulcrum that may tip the balance of life. Without me, this place as we know it will cease to exist. As life drains from me, all life ceases to exist."

"Just a bit dramatic, don't you think, Prof?" Ben grunted.

A startling apparition appeared in the gap between door and doorjamb. It was shaped like a small human but looked like a moving, quivering column of liquid, refracting light so that what might be a solid core appeared to shift back and forth. Behind it loomed several more such beings. Desperate, Ben drove his buck knife into what he hoped was the creature's neck. Liquid spurted everywhere, but the creature kept pushing into the closet.

Now Ben could see eyes, multi-faceted gold-colored eyes, like those of dragonflies. Terror drove him to attack with all his strength and he jammed the buck knife into one of those eyes, twisting the blade. The eyes went dark, and the creature collapsed right at his feet. Now Ben was able to slam the door shut.

This created a frenzy of noise and pounding on the other side. Ben could only conclude, as crazy as the idea seemed, that these creatures were aliens and that they'd never encountered a door before and didn't know how this simple wooden object was preventing them from killing the two humans.

"Not so dramatic, my friend," the professor said, clinging to Ben's shirt sleeve as if that were the only thing between him and total panic. "I have information this world needs to defeat these beings."

Ben kept trying to move the professor farther back into the broom closet so that he had room to move. He fumbled for the light switch and turned it on to reveal the carnage at their feet. "Woo hoo, that's a very dead alien," Ben said to the professor, his flippancy designed to cover the horror he felt. The light showed that the professor's face was gray and seemingly ill from the sight of fresh death.

"Don't you puke in here," Ben snapped, "or I'm going to open this door and toss you out."

The professor regained his composure or at least swallowed any vomit that might be rising in the back of his throat. The scratching and clawing and smashing on the other side of the door dropped off suddenly and Ben felt confused as well as terrified.

Bang! A thud so hard upon the door that the hinges and Ben's chest reverberated with the impact. "Shit," he snapped. "Move, Professor, let me past you for a sec." Clearly the professor did not want Ben to move behind him and leave him to face whatever had just hit the door. Shoving the professor aside, Ben slid his ass down to the floor and, bracing his back against the wall, stretched his legs out and slammed his feet against the bottom of the door. He did not have to wait long for the next impact. Bang!

"Get down here and give me a hand, you fool!" Ben yelled.

The old man complied, and they both braced their feet against the bottom of the door.

Bang! Small splinters of wood from the shattering door fell to the floor. Bang! What sounded like the loud rumbling of a diesel engine starting on a cold winter's day came from beyond the door, intensifying Ben's fear. The sound of wood cracking became louder. Boom! The top of the door split open and large splinters fell to the floor.

A long, metallic, snaking object entered through the crack, forming spikes along its length. The limb became rigid and smashed into the one light, sending glass and ceiling debris

everywhere. The room went black.

Ben felt as if his heart had stopped beating as silence followed the shattering of the light bulb. Beyond the door gunfire erupted. It wasn't the automatic gunfire of the military, but from a hunter's rifle. The long, spiked tentacle was slowly withdrawn from the closet, and new sounds indicated that the aliens were moving off in the direction of the gunfire.

"What do you do for a living?" the professor asked.

What an insane question! Ben thought. But it had broken the tension and he was breathing again.

"Are you a boxer or some kind of kung fu fighter?" the professor persisted. "Maybe you're ex-military?"

Maybe the old boy had snapped. Better just answer him and see if that would keep him quiet. Relaxing and rubbing his legs after the ordeal of holding the door firmly shut against the pounding of the aliens, Ben answered. "I was a monk, in Anatolia in Turkey." He could not quell the sad note in his voice. "I left the monastery when my faith in God was destroyed by what I learned from some old manuscripts I was translating."

The professor seemed shaken by the response. "I never would have guessed you for a priest. You're so Rambo."

Ben responded quickly, "Well, I never would have pegged you for a professor. Your actions were less than intelligent when you got us stuck in this closet. I thought hiding in the vault of the abandoned bank across the street wiser; it has a better door."

After an awkward silence, Ben relaxed a bit and asked, "What about you? I know you're a professor, but a professor of what?"

"I'm retired now, but in my day, I was a member of an elite American academy of advisors to the president. My specialties were astrophysics and math. But these days I occupy my time on an archaeological dig site." Shuffling his feet against the base of the splintered closet door, he continued. "My students and I are rediscovering an ancient site in Turkey, called Gobekli Tepe."

"Never heard of the place," Ben said.

"Good, then we can be civil to each other. The church is not happy with my efforts to dig up this old site." A broad smile lit the old man's heavily lined face.

"Well, I'm sure the church has its reasons for not liking you. God knows I'm not fond of you right now myself," Ben said, with an equally broad smile. "But seriously, why should the church care what you do in your retirement?" He rubbed his back gently.

"It seems that after the site was built, it was deliberately buried. A few years back, a group from the University of Chicago began digging it up and was stopped by the church, which had the place again reburied. Then I found intriguing references to the site in some old papers and got permission from the Turkish government to dig it up yet again."

Ben found this interesting. "So why would the church insist that the site remain buried? Did you ever get an answer from the Diocese?"

"Actually, I got a letter directly from the pope, with only a simple message, 'Stop at once. You know not what you do.' Curious that they seem to think they know more about this site than archaeology can teach us, don't you think?"

With the continuing gunfire becoming fainter, Ben thought that the silence outside the closet might mean that the aliens were preoccupied with a new fight. Now might be a good time to find another place to hide. Standing up and peering out the broken door, Ben said. "Get up; let's move! If we hurry, we might be able to get out of this building and hook up with the guys who have the guns."

"Good," the professor said. "Then we need to get to the military. With their help, and my knowledge of what can save us all, we stand a fighting chance."

The professor stood up, stepped past Ben out into the hallway, and almost into the arms of a waiting alien. The creature raised one appendage holding what appeared to be a weapon and fired a razor-sharp spike, with barbs along the edges, straight into the chest of the old professor.

He screamed and collapsed. The alien's semi-transparent form bent to inspect the professor's body, then straightened. Suddenly Ben realized the alien was refocusing its weapon at him.

Ben drew some incredible luck. He turned back to grab a mop handle he thought might make a good weapon. At that same moment, the alien leapt full force toward Ben and, missing him by just inches, blew past and struck the electrical wall panel. Sparks shot everywhere. The alien seemed to have merged with the panel; liquid spilled to the floor. The hard portion was receiving the full electrical current, frying like bacon on a grill until it fell to the floor. There it lay, quite still.

Ben turned from the alien to find the professor choking on his own blood. He knelt beside the dying man and began praying for his soul.

"Frequency in hertz 823.43 from Stonehenge," moaned the professor.

"What are you saying?" asked Ben.

"The answer... 823..."

The professor's body jerked once, and it was over. He was dead.

Ben held the professor for a few minutes. They had become friends in their short time together. They had shared a plane ride from hell in an attempt to escape the chaos, got trapped in a closet and now, after being terrorized, the professor was gone, and Ben was once again in the company of the church's old nemesis, death. Yet he was not alone, for the alien was now rising behind the mourning man.

Ben sensed the alien stirring, jumped to his feet, and ran for the exit. Outside, in the intense sunlight, Ben shaded his eyes and looked toward the noise of gunfire just down the street. A pretty young girl caught his gaze. She seemed so out of place, blasting continuously with a large shotgun at an advancing alien. The thing bearing down on her appeared to be passing solid mass through liquid as the impact of the shotgun rounds sheared fragments off its body. Yet still the alien advanced on her.

She was yelling, but Ben couldn't hear the words over the noise of the guns. Straining to see, he could just make out the figure of another young girl who was shooting at several aliens moving rapidly toward her. Ben realized that it was the sound of these guns that had drawn the aliens from the closet where he and the professor had been hiding. Across the road was the bank he first considered as a hiding place. More importantly, there was the bank's armored truck. Ben raced to the truck, pulled out the dead body of the driver, climbed in, and started the engine.

Roaring full speed down the road, Ben sent the truck smashing into the closest alien.

The impact slowed the truck, but tore the hard portion of the alien's body away from the liquid part, as it disappeared under the front of the vehicle.

The young girl jumped into the cab. Several hard rods smashed in through the back of the truck, just missing the two occupants. Ben floored the gas pedal and the truck lurched forward.

Aliens had surrounded the second young girl. As they turned toward the truck, Ben crashed headlong into the mass, again scattering alien bodies which splattered into fragments both liquid and solid. The second girl threw herself into the cab, and Ben drove on, aiming for the military base he hoped was close by.

Chapter 8 Charger goes to war

"Danny Opinhimmer isn't the smartest guy that ever lived," Suzie said to her girlfriend. "I used to think maybe he was a little handicapped, but the day he spoke, I mean really spoke to me, it was like someone else had crawled inside his head and took over."

Bambi knew that Suzie loved Danny with all her heart, for she only ever talked about him. Didn't matter what subject came up; all her conversations revolved right back to Danny.

"I thought he was going to be just another useless boyfriend." Suzie checked the bathroom mirror and added a bit more lip gloss. "I've seen them come and seen them go, but Danny is different."

Both girls had spent way too long in the bathroom, Danny thought. He could imagine what a vast network of gossip was being transmitted to all parts of the reservation from inside that barroom can. It never failed; everyone seemed to know what was happening in his relationship with Suzie before he did.

As the two girls returned to the booth where the three had been drinking beer, they took no notice of the silence that had fallen over the bar. The girls just kept chatting until Danny finally turned to them and said, "What the hell, man! Can't you see what's happening on the tube?" The girls turned their attention to the TV.

"To repeat," the newsman said, "we ask that everyone remain calm, and stay indoors. Both the military and police are using the roads as access to the areas of these explosions. Please stay off the streets to help emergency vehicles and services. As soon as we get more information, we will be letting the public know where the explosions are taking place." The newsman's confused expression made it obvious that he really had no idea what was happening.

"You hear that? Sounds like huge parts of the white man's world are blowing up," Danny said, with a smirk. "Guess there really is a god." Then he started laughing.

"Shut the hell up, Danny, people are hurt," Suzie said, scowling. "Geez, sometimes you're such a freakin' idiot!"

Looking down at his half empty beer mug, Danny said, "Was just a joke...fuck."

"That's right," Suzie said. "Everything's always just a big joke to you, isn't it?"

The TV became the focus of their beer drinking. As the night wore on, it became clear with each news update that something was going very wrong out there beyond the dim lights of the bar, beyond the reservation, beyond the world they knew.

Then everything just stopped. No TV, no phones, no radio, no sound at all. For a moment the bar was dead silent, then the questions began.

"What's happening?"

"What the fuck?"

"Is the world coming to an end?"

Danny turned to the two girls and said, "Maybe we should head back home. Seems whitey has spoiled the night yet again." Both Bambi and Suzie chewed out Danny as they picked up their stuff and headed for the truck.

As morning brightened the horizon, Danny's friend, Bobby Running Bear, burst into Danny's house. Bobby was so thin that Danny sometimes said you could just spread maple syrup on him and have him for breakfast. Suzie scrambled for some clothes.

"Did you hear? Did ya? It's a goddam alien invasion!" Bobby sounded hysterical, though he

was staring intently at Suzie's half-naked body. "The whole damn world's on fire and Emma says her sister in Maine saw the whole goddam thing. Just before the power went down, Emma's sister said she saw army trucks and soldiers shooting at something, and there were tons of explosions and houses on fire and, shit, man! It's aliens, real fucking aliens!"

"What the hell, man? Like Mexicans or something?" Danny asked as he fumbled for his pants.

"No! Listen to me, Danny. I mean, like real aliens, like space aliens, like fucking aliens from Mars!" Bobby grabbed Danny by the shoulders and shook him.

"Get off me, man," Danny spat. "What the hell? You on crack or something?"

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion while Bobby frantically waved his skinny arms and Danny and Suzie tried to take in what he was saying. After they moved to the kitchen, Bambi came in and looked at them sitting around the table. "What's all the yelling about?" she asked as she rubbed the sleep from her round face.

"That's it, man," Bobby said. "We got to get the hell out of here, go to the hills and hide." His gaze shifted to Bambi. "And start repopulating Earth."

"Yeah, like that will ever happen, you pimple-face dweeb," Bambi said as she stared right back into Bobby's eyes.

"No, wait, Bobby's right," Danny said. "We got to get to the hills. My dad showed me an old cave out there once. We can hide out in the cave till we know what's really happening."

Bambi seemed about as impressed with Danny as she was with Bobby, but after a little more argument, the move to the hills was what they decided to do.

As they loaded gear into the back of the truck, Bambi asked, "Should we tell our folks where we're going?"

Bobby replied, "Do you even know where your folks are?"

"I guess not," Bambi responded sadly.

Danny knew where his folks were. In the graveyard. His uncle was still around, but he was over in Turkey somewhere, digging history out of the ground. The old guy had done research on aliens, too, and maybe he'd know what was going down. But he was too far away to do them any good right now.

Danny's friends had had a rough upbringing in the deserts of Arizona. Set apart from the town communities, they mostly spent their days watching television or playing video games online. Gaming was good for Danny, for it gave him the chance to be with people who did not judge him by the color of his skin. He liked online combat games, and they liked him. He was often the leader of small groups of gamers who battled monsters or evil-doers, spending hours honing and sharpening strategies that would be the envy of most military colleges.

The drive up into the hills to the cave had Bobby really revved up. He sat with Bambi on his lap, and every rough bump was heaven for him.

"Down, boy," Bambi chided. "Remember the aliens. That's the only reason I would ever ride anywhere with you."

Nothing could deflate Bobby's ego at that moment. They made the cave by midday, set up camp in a dark area deep inside, and built a small fire. There they sat, eating homemade bannock and beef jerky the girls had brought. As night fell, Danny and Bobby went out into the darkness and climbed to the top of the hill. They could see the town's faint lights off in the distance.

The air felt thick and heavy, as though all Earth's cool breezes had gone stale. The starry sky was slowly and relentlessly turning black, and the hairs on Danny's arms were now standing up straight. Suddenly, a bluish blaze of light, followed by an intense white beam, streaked down

from the clouds, and slammed into the small town on the horizon. The two heard a faint puff, then a moment later were knocked flat on their backs from the stunning impact of air hitting them square in the chest. Scrambling back to their feet, they saw that the town was gone. Now a dark rolling cloud containing arcs of wicked light was striking outward in all directions.

"Shit, that's coming toward us," gasped Danny as he yanked on Bobby's shirt. They both scurried back down the hill to the cave. They raced along the tunnels and, when they reached the girls, yelled, "Hide, hide!" and kicked sand onto the fire.

The two couples huddled in the darkness, one on either side of the dead fire, hearing snapping and scraping sounds far off in the distance. Danny held Suzie close but they both shivered all night long. At dawn, a faint light from the tunnel entrance brought some hope that the terror was over. Danny looked over at Bobby and asked, "Do we go out and look?"

Bobby just sat there with the oddest smile on his stupid-looking face.

"I better not be pregnant," Bambi snapped.

"Ah, geez, what the hell, man?" Danny said to Bobby.

Bobby got up and the two of them walked quietly to the entrance, slowly and cautiously, wanting to see what lay outside. As they peered out at the dull gray day beyond the entrance, Bobby turned to Danny and said, "Scored!"

Danny replied, "Shut the hell up, man, I don't wanna know!"

Nothing looked out of the ordinary; the sky was a dull gray, but it was still there. The two of them ventured out further, eventually reaching the top of the hill and looking toward the town off in the distance. It was gone. All they could see was a gigantic pit, with some type of red stuff at the edges.

Bobby stood up and said, "Well, guess that's all over, so what do we do now?"

Danny continued to lie on his belly, staring at the pit where the town had been, and said quietly, "I really don't know."

From the ring of destruction, something stirred. Dirt flew up into the air in puffs, and then a snaking ridge of soil seemed to be moving rapidly from the pit toward the two friends.

"Bobby," Danny said cautiously, "Uh, Bobby, maybe you should lay down again." The snaking ridge of soil was drawing closer.

Bobby pointed at the moving soil and said, "What the fuck?"

Danny stood up and started back down the hill to the cave entrance, calling back over his shoulder, "I ain't stayin' to find out. C'mon!"

Bobby decided his best bet was to run, too, but as he turned to follow Danny, the ground beneath his feet opened up, and a white-hot spear of burning light shot up, slicing him in two. Danny saw it happen as he hurried into the cave entrance.

As he bolted down the tunnels, chunks of rock broke off the walls and floor and flashes of light slashed out at him as he ducked and dodged. He yelled for the girls, but it was too late. As he approached, dust filled the cave. Through the dust came wicked flashes of light and screams. For a moment, what looked like blinking gold-colored eyes stared at Danny.

A sudden violent explosion blasted the inside of the cave. It blew Danny several feet and broke off a portion of the wall next to where he landed in a hurricane of dust and wind and heat, revealing another tunnel slicing off in a downward angle. Danny struggled to his feet. A dim figure materialized out of the dust, and terror sucked the air out of Danny's chest. It was twice as large as a man, with long, wild hair, and two fangs sticking out either side of its mouth.

For a second, Danny stood frozen with fear. Then the floor beneath his feet gave way. He tumbled down into the darkness, screaming, "Wendigo! Wendigo!"

Unconsciousness took him for several hours. When he came to, he was cut, bruised, and stuck. And it was dark. With no idea of what day it was and little idea of where he was, Danny sobbed in frustration. But not for long.

It took two days for him to reach the surface again, fighting the rock debris and the dust. This time he was far more cautious. He decided to go back to the truck and get the hell away from the cave. He was alone, hungry, and very angry. This fight was over for now, but he was alive, and he'd be able to fight tomorrow. As he drove the old truck down the road, not knowing where he was heading, he could think only one thought. He would raise an army and drive these alien things from his land even if it killed him.

Danny drove his old pickup well into the night, thinking of the way he'd lost Suzie, Bobby, and Bambi to the alien attack. The cave they had hidden in and the destruction the aliens had wrought was fresh in his memory, a nightmare that wouldn't go away. Then the old pickup began to sputter and surge, bringing Danny out of his dazed sorrow to realize it must be almost out of gas. As luck would have it, just ahead of him was an all-night gas station. From inside the station, a tall, thin, young man who looked like a farm boy walked out into the night to gas up Danny's truck.



"Fill the tank with regular?" Henry didn't really expect an answer. Anybody driving a beat-up pickup like this one wouldn't want to pay extra for unleaded.

"Yeah." The young guy driving glanced around and added quietly, "It's so peaceful here, hard to believe the world is burning all around us."

"What's that?" Either he hadn't heard right, or the guy wasn't making sense.

"I was just commenting on the quiet here. Guess the aliens haven't got this far yet." The guy lifted his head from the steering wheel and turned to look at Henry.

"Aliens? We don't get many Mexicans this far north. This isn't market garden country, it's mostly wheat and corn," Henry replied. The pump handle discharged, showing the truck's tank had reached full.

The driver spoke again. "No, I meant the real aliens, not illegal aliens."

"Sorry, I don't follow you, what aliens?" Henry was beginning to think the guy was drunk. Or on some kind of drugs. Stupid.

"You don't know? There's been an invasion, I just watched my hometown get burned to the ground and three of my friends die." The man sounded sad.

"Okay. Guess you're a little tired tonight. Might want to pull the truck over to the parking lot and catch a few winks." It would be bad if the guy drove away and fell asleep at the wheel. He was either dead tired or drunk. Or maybe on drugs, since there was no smell of booze on him.

The guy went still, then stared straight into Henry's eyes. "Hey, what's your name?"

"Henry. But most people call me Charger. I been working on my Dodge Charger for a long time. It's close to perfect now." Just a little more work on the leather upholstery and he'd take it out for a drive.

"Well, Henry alias Charger, there was an alien invasion happened about three days ago. You might want to buy a radio, or a TV, and tune in, because people in America are fucking dying everywhere, and I'm guessing that, in a few days, this backwater will be a battle zone. Or you can just go on thinking I'm some shit-for-brains kook, and go bury your melon in the dirt till you get your fucking ass shot off! How much for the fuel?"

Henry couldn't help staring. Something was wrong with the guy. Probably best not to challenge him. On the other hand, he hadn't listened to the radio or the TV for days because he'd been busy with the Dodge. "It's on the house, friend, it's all good, I can see you're tired, you're welcome to crash round back." He backed away from the truck.

"Fuck, whatever. Which way to town?" The man tossed a fifty on the ground.

"Follow this road till you get to a stop sign, then go left. That takes you toward the city, but you really shouldn't drive."

The old truck surged to life.

"Hey, wait!" Henry said. "I owe you three dollars and fourteen cents!"

Dust and exhaust sprayed into the air as the man floored the gas pedal and shot out onto the road. In a moment, the truck disappeared around a curve.

Henry went into the garage and turned on the radio. There wouldn't be any news about aliens on it, but the guy had seemed too serious to be making it up. Maybe he should listen to the news sometimes anyway, even if it was never interesting.

He was stunned by what he heard. The guy had been right. America was at war. With aliens. He could barely believe it.

When seven in the morning rolled around, Henry walked to the house behind the garage. He stopped on the front step and stared at his father's field of corn before he went in. The green leaves were beautiful in the slanting early sunlight. He nodded. Yeah, there was only one thing to do.

When he looked into his dad's room, the old man was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands, his gray hair sticking up in all directions.

"You feeling any better, Dad?"

Steve raised his head. "Some. Figured I should get up and at least go watch TV for a while. Haven't seen any news for days." He'd gone down with the 'flu five days ago.

"That's good. You have to look after the garage now."

His father sat up straight and stared at him. "How come? Where're you going?"

"I'm joining the army. We're at war."

"What? Are you crazy?"

"Go turn on the TV, Dad. I'm going to say goodbye to Beth." He knew she'd be back now from a week's camping trip into the mountains with her folks.

Beth was his girl. People said she was pretty, with her long, blonde hair and the ice-blue eyes, but what he liked was how gentle and sweet she acted. She always seemed to know when he needed space, and she never gave him a rough time about being different.

"Hey, Charger!" she said, when she opened the door to him. "What's happening? I gotta go to work in twenty minutes."

He told her what was happening. She looked stunned.

"We got home late last night. We never even turned on the TV." A smile replaced her frown. "Are you teasing me? Was that a joke?"

"No joke," Henry said. "I'm gonna get Dal in a little while, and we'll join up. Those aliens better start running right now!"

He put his arms around her for a couple of minutes, his fingers tangled in her silken hair. Then held her away from him. "You take care, okay? I'll be back."

She put her face against his chest, then straightened. "You, too."

He didn't turn around to look back. He knew she was watching him go, that her face would be solemn and sad. He didn't want to see the sadness, didn't want it weighing on him. He didn't

want to leave her, sure, but he had to go. It was wrong for these aliens to attack innocent people.

Back home, Henry shoved a few things in an overnight bag. Steve was shaved and dressed and making toast.

"You sure you should be doing this?" Steve asked.

Henry nodded. "It's okay. I'm good at math."

His dad sighed. "Yeah, I know you are." He looked like he wanted to say more.

Henry didn't give him the chance. "I'll call Dal now and get his ass moving." Dal was short for Delaware. His folks had been halfway there for a vacation when he was born.

Dal sounded like he was barely awake. Or deep into a computer game. But that changed fast.

"Shit, you're crazy, Charger. Ain't no such thing as aliens," Dal said.

"I'm not shitting you, Dal. A bunch of aliens have picked a fight with us, and we gotta fight back. We gotta go enlist! They're calling for troops on the radio, go listen!"

"I ain't gonna go listen to no radio. God made only us humans, never nobody else. Ain't no such thing as aliens, 'cept for Mexicans," Dal said grumpily.

"Turn your goddam computer game off and go listen!" Henry snapped. Dal didn't have a clue when it came to aliens. He was one himself, come to that; his folks came from Delhi.

"Shit," Dal muttered.

Henry heard Dal's chair creak as he got up. Then he sat and waited and waited, until nearly ten minutes had gone by. Then he hung up the phone, drove the tow truck over to Dal's house, and walked into the kitchen. "What the hell, why didn't you come back to the phone?"

Dal sat sideways on a kitchen chair. His brown eyes had a stunned deer-in-the-headlights look. Henry tapped Dal's head with a finger. "Hey, you still alive in there?"

"I don't believe it, they said New York was gone, I mean just gone. The whole city just wiped out, that's like over a million people!" Dal stuttered.

"Way more than that. There are nine million, two hundred and twenty-six thousand, seven hundred and forty-nine people in New York."

Dal stared at him. "You sure about that?"

"Well, give or take a few, I guess. People never seem to stay still."

"I can't understand how so many people got killed so fast," Dal said. He looked scared.

"How can we win against that kind of stuff?" He was almost whispering. "The radio guy said the army was fighting these things, and we should all join up now."

They were quiet for a moment, then Henry put his hand on Dal's shoulder and said firmly, "I'm heading back to the station. I'm gonna take wheels from the shop and put them on the Dodge, and I'm gonna ride to the army base and join up."

And, he thought, from now on I'll be Charger, not Henry. Cause that's what I'm gonna do, is charge into battle, I'm gonna move just like the Dodge. "You can stay here and die, or you can come with me. We get some guns, and we fight back. Hell, maybe they'll even give us a tank. I can drive pretty good now, my dad says."

Dal looked up to meet Charger's gaze and replied, "You really think they'd give us a tank?"

"Sure, why not? They ain't gonna just let those things lay around and rust."

Dal left a note on the table for his mom and dad. Then he went back to the shop with Charger and helped him put new wheels on the Dodge.

Before they left, Charger stood back and admired the paint job on the car. He'd sprayed it purple himself, his favorite color. He gave a last-minute rub to the leather upholstery while Dal fidgeted in the background. It wasn't perfect, but fighting the aliens was more important.



Charger and Dal stayed in a motel the first night on the road and watched TV as well as having the radio on. These first days of the war sounded like pure chaos. All the newscasters were looking for answers nobody could give them. What were these things attacking all the cities? And why were they doing it? Why was so much happening all at once? While the newscasters talked, jets screamed overhead.

The television showed scenes of panic and fear as people lashed out at everyone in their way, even neighbors, as they all tried to escape the mists the invaders sprayed everywhere. In the cities, gigantic objects moved rapidly about, almost a blur to the eye. Charger couldn't tell whether they were life forms or machines, but they were deadly. At first, so one report said, the smaller aliens didn't seem to possess weapons; instead, they themselves were weapons. From their bodies, they formed solid parts that cut, slashed, hacked, and at times flashed out like bullets, cutting down human soldiers.

In spite of all that, the newscasters said these first days of the invasion had gone well. Even the President came on television saying that humans were advancing on all fronts throughout the world.

The cameras had made it to the front lines and the footage they got was amazing. The aliens looked squishy. They were squishy, obviously, but they could form into hard objects that crashed down on soldiers in the fray of battle. The reporter said at first the military found that bullets passed right through them until they formed hard parts. Then they could be shattered like broken glass. The fighting was wild at first, advance and dodge until the aliens went hard, then open up on their asses with artillery, often having to fire at point blank range.

When that newscast was over, Dal said, "Let's go hunt squishies."

It was dark and raining when they drove away from the motel, but life looked pretty exciting. Seemed right to both of them to bring a Rat Rod Dodge to the main gates of the military base and step out like young heroes looking to join the Army and go fight.

"You newbies here today got lucky; you get choices!" the old sergeant yelled. He was a large, heavyset man with a thin beard but no hair on his head. Looking at newbies standing in street clothes seemed to make his face turn redder. "Now, you can go off and fight like good little soldiers and die. Or, for a limited time only, we can make you into super-soldiers." There was a sneer in the sergeant's voice. "That's right – I said super, like Superman or Captain America. You hicks can join up and go fight super style."

Charger felt like the smile on his face was large enough that his ears were disappearing. Man, he wanted to be super! So, he'd been an auto mechanic before, and he'd fixed cars, trucks, and bikes. But he didn't have to stay a mechanic. Now was his chance to be a hero. "Dal, let's do it!"

"Yeah, I know already," Dal said. "We're fighting men super style now."

Charger could feel the excitement rippling through the recruits. It seemed almost possible to smell the youthful energy. Everyone there wanted to be super, just like him.

The sergeant turned to his corporal and, with regret in his voice, said, "Take these guys to Conversions, and may God forgive me."

What the sergeant had said to the corporal didn't sink in until around day three of the conversion, when Charger found the stench of his flesh almost unbearable. He looked at the recruits, lined up like cattle. They were going through a conversion that seemed to have one goal: kill them very, very slowly, and they just might survive being changed into Hyborgs.

He discovered the process was exacting in its science and tremendously painful in its application. Over a period of a few days, the volunteers found their bodies growing larger in stature and thicker in muscle mass. It was hard to keep track of the combination of different medications, physical surgery, and nanotechnology being applied, but he was determined to understand what was happening to him.

At one point, his leg muscles grew so thick that the long bones in his legs had to be surgically cut in half and metal spacers added to give him a longer stride. The bones were reinforced internally with what he could only describe as concrete. The large muscle mass that formed on his arms made them almost uncontrollable. They tended to twitch and then go rock hard. The solution to this turned out to be the surgical implantation of an organic attachment that held a power source, and several micro motors surgically linked to points on his arm bones and tendons.

After a time, as flesh healed, the medics applied a metallic, living, organic body-armor to him. This thick, scaly skin, a copper color so dark it was almost black, was like that found on crocodiles, they told him. It was strong and flexible, but it made him smell like death. He was never sure which process had made his canine teeth grow larger and longer, but the image of the vampire was obvious. His heart rate was slowed, and his breathing became shallow. Some of the volunteers found their cognitive abilities had dropped dramatically. Charger had always thought Dal was a bit stupid, but after the medical processes, he was often stuck for an answer to 'good morning.'

Charger's optic lobes had been enhanced to see better in the dark. This meant that a skin or shield had to be placed over the retina, giving it the appearance of a milky white surface. That surface, though, reflected not just the light, but also the faces they looked at, like a mirror. It made outsiders very uncomfortable.

He finally decided they didn't look quite like vampires, but more like really vicious undead with disfigured bodies. But they needed to eat meat and also drink blood because their bodies couldn't produce blood anymore.

Dal thought it was cool to call himself a vampire, but Charger knew they weren't vampires, just deformed. If he decided to bite someone, that person wouldn't become like him or go batty; he would just bleed.

The recruits were told that military intelligence had discovered that the mist the aliens used was what killed humans, and since it was dark inside the mist, what better fighters for humanity than the undead night stalkers of myth who could see in the dark? Though once, when he happened to look into a mirror, Charger wondered if whoever designed the super-soldiers had based them on the Wendigo. His facial features were striking, though the armor covered everything else. His eyes were farther apart than they used to be. His mouth was twisted. Four fangs protruded from his mouth. He looked nothing like the young man with thick brown hair and blue eyes who had gazed back at him from the bathroom mirror the morning he left home.

"Are you still breathing?" Dal asked as Charger lay strapped to the medical bed a day or two later.

"I don't think so, least not for the last hour or so."

"How is that even possible?" Dal demanded. "Don't we need air to talk? Like to push air past our voice box, I mean?"

"Don't know," Charger replied, pulling at the straps that bound him to the table. "I don't know how aliens can exist either. Maybe we don't need air to live now." It seemed like a clever answer.

"That's just stupid," Dal protested. "I'm still breathing. And I don't understand what they're doing to us. I never heard of anything like this before and I should of because my old man was in the military once."

Charger tried to grin through the pain and concentrated on the delightful fact that volunteers for the Hyborg program received little of the basic training mandatory in most armies. "I never heard of anybody else getting stuff like this done to them either, but I'll bet it's been a military secret for years. You know, like the army always has knowledge they don't let on to ordinary civilians."

As the last boost to their prowess, they'd had their skulls enlarged surgically, to allow for the input of biomechanical enhancements to sight, hearing and thinking processes. These alterations included built-in instructions on how to fight and survive. It was great to have all that power but why couldn't they have had it before? Didn't seem fair for governments to hide stuff from the people.

As the days went by, Charger began to get used to the alterations. They felt weird but he wasn't going to worry about that. He had other things to think about, like killing the aliens who were attacking his people and his home.

Chapter 9 The Eagles land

The atmosphere was somber as the German chancellor approached the microphone at the podium. The technician behind the camera focused in tight as the well-dressed older woman with a stern expression began to speak. Though her composure denoted strength and resilience, her faltering voice betrayed fear and anguish, mixed with great sadness. Firmly clutching the top corners of the podium, she faced the camera squarely.

"Today, Germany gives to the world her most sacred possession, our sons and daughters in combat," she said. "We hope that this day will erase the mark of shame carried by many of our generations and lift that burden from our shoulders." Her fingers clenched, and her bottom lip began to tremble. A single tear slid down one cheek. "God have mercy on us all!"

She turned from the camera and walked quickly from the main hall to the combat Ready Room filled with generals and their staff. No media followed, clamoring for further answers. This topic was not open to debate. The lone camera technician packed his camera and left the building.

In the confusion of those early days, it was a bright young German general who first realized that the aliens were landing their forces along shorelines around the world, that they were attacking with the sea at their backs and driving the world's populations, like cattle, steadily inward to the center of each continent. It was this saving moment of clarity that allowed one landlocked country to form an opposition to the invaders. The question was: would the world accept help from the German people, who had for years been stained by the paintbrush of propaganda wielded by the victors? Nevertheless, a decision had to be made. Where could they mobilize a resistance that would do the most good?

"America has the most advanced fighting force in the world today. They can win if we give them the time they need to organize," General Dieter A'Ochay said to the diplomats, politicians and military personnel huddled in a bunker far below ground level. Alternately pounding his fist on the desk and pointing to various locations on the map, he said forcefully, "We cannot spread our forces to help all, but we can stall and possibly turn the tide of war, if only briefly, so these Americans can deploy their military to defeat this catastrophe. If nothing else, we can draw the main alien forces to America so the rest of the world can regroup."

"No, no! If we fortify Germany now, we will best serve the fatherland," a balding, fat man said. He rocked back and forth in his chair, agitated by the general's demanding posture. "There are many nations around the world who could find refuge in our arms. We could save the world if we simply fortify ourselves." Sweat formed on the fat man's forehead as he realized the general's gaze was now fixed squarely on him.

The German chancellor spoke softly but her voice silenced the room. "We will go to America. We will start there, and we will also die there, as we would here. Even a well-defended landlocked country is nothing more than a coffin." The atmosphere in the room became calm. There seemed nothing further to say; the decision had been made.

Germany steeled herself for the task ahead. Soldiers immediately began boarding planes. Weapons were checked and rechecked and, in the darkness, hundreds of heavy aircraft lifted into the air on course to America.

It was almost dawn as the first of the German aircraft flew over America's Atlantic seaboard. There had been no response to their communications, which greatly concerned the German

pilots. Entering America's air space might be seen as a provocation if they could not inform her of their intentions. As they flew over the eastern states, the soldiers looked down on burning, tormented lands below, a scene straight out of hell. Large twisting red masses rose up from the shores everywhere. Here and there, American jet fighters descended on those red masses, dropping bombs that seemed to have little effect on the alien foothold.

One of the German pilots reported that contact had been made to those in command of the American offensive, and the fleet was now being directed to strategic locations throughout the States.

The German formation began splitting up and flying to assigned locations, escorted by American jet fighters. The masses of alien fortifications growing along the shorelines occasionally revealed small swirling vortices emanating from the red mass. Shooting skyward, they seemed to be aimed at low-flying jet fighters. Projections that looked like spinning saw blades attached to a gray snake-like arm occasionally sliced into a jet fighter, sending it spiraling to the ground in flames. One pilot ejected from his plane within view of the German soldiers. As the pilot descended to the ground, an alien swarm massed beneath him, reached up and pulled the hapless pilot to the ground, tearing his body to shreds.

There was no taking of prisoners in this fight, only utter annihilation.

One squadron of German aircraft that had left from Asia and crossed the Pacific Ocean made its way south from Alaska, flying over what remained of Canada. The cities along the shores of this vast country lay smashed and broken. A peaceful country, Canada had been ill-prepared for the destruction that overwhelmed it. Huge tracts of land blackened and devoid of all life, bleak as a desert, stretched into the distance. Here and there, large alien red masses dotted the shorelines and seemed joined together, even at long distances, by moving tentacles or tree-like roots in the ground.

As they flew over Canada, one of the heavy lift aircraft began having mechanical issues. These soon became serious, and the word was passed to commanders that this failing craft would soon plummet to the ground. They decided that another German plane would land with the disabled aircraft and that the two groups would dig in and hold their positions until an offloaded rescue group could return.

Falling away from the main fleet, the two planes started their descent toward the ground. The pilots could see that landing would be easy. The ground everywhere was black and smooth and lifeless. The soldiers aboard the two planes were apprised of the situation and everyone moved fast, stowing gear and prepping weapons. Most of the soldiers spent a good portion of the remaining flight time fussing with the new biomechanical gear they wore, the backpack that contained all the ammunition and other gear. From the side of the pack hung a swing arm that allowed a soldier to quickly retrieve his weapon from the pack and swing it to the firing position. This allowed the hands to be free when in travel. Nevertheless, the body armor received the most attention. Soldiers checked and rechecked the fit of the armor on soldiers next to them; no one wanted his armor to fail.

The landing was relatively smooth, and the two planes taxied to an area where they could park close together. Just before stopping, the stricken plane retracted its landing gear, dropping the craft directly to the ground and digging in. Soldiers quickly evacuated the planes and started setting up a defensible perimeter.

The attack came almost at once.

One of the root-like tentacles, partly buried in the blackened soil and partly exposed, like those the German pilots had seen from the air, was reported moving toward the small party. As it

approached, motion and radar detectors sounded alarms, giving location and speed of the incoming alien attack. The root tentacle was advancing at a tremendous speed, well over two hundred miles per hour.

Within moments the first gun was fired. The Germans started their defense with the new, light, long-range cannons, made of composite materials. These weapons were easy to set up and deploy, and were most effective in their ability to launch small nuclear artillery rounds over vast distances.

Multiple mushroom clouds dotted the horizon, and still the alarms rang out as the aliens continued attacking. They seemed able to shift position at the last second, thus avoiding missiles fired at them.

Now the second line of defense fired. Napalm rockets streaked across the sky, lighting the ground afire before the approaching chaos. A wall of intense flames rose skyward, seemingly blocking the path of the aliens but again, they simply shifted and kept on coming.

The third line of defense, large generators aboard the two aircraft, surged to life. Blinding beams of intense laser light, based on research done by the inventor Nikola Tesla, shot from mobile ground units, mixed with smaller particle rail guns. These had some effect. Portions of the root like tentacle broke off. The advancing alien hesitated momentarily but pressed on.

When the splintering alien mass was within yards of the dug-in German forces, the soldiers loosed a brutal crossfire of steel-tipped armor-piercing gunfire. Now close to the humans, the mass emitted its killing mist. Soldiers scrambled to put on gas masks.

Swarms of alien bodies erupted from the tunnels created by the tree-like root tentacles. Hideous solid masses moving inside liquid body parts struck forward onto the German troops, slicing the soldiers to pieces. An advancing tentacle rose from the ground and struck the broken aircraft, piercing easily through the armor and shattering the plane. Seeing this, the second, still-intact aircraft began moving, and troops not dead or dying scrambled for the hatches to escape the carnage.

The attempt was in vain. In front of the aircraft accelerating away from combat, the ground rippled, and the blackened land gave way as a large chasm opened. Thousands of whirling vortexes rose up, projecting long gray snake-like objects with spinning saw blades that tore into and shredded the rolling aircraft and its occupants, converting it into exploding fragments. The fleeing aircraft disintegrated.

Unbelievably, despite all the carnage and chaos, one soldier survived. Damaged but alive, a young woman with pale, blonde hair, blue eyes, and the rank of sergeant lay motionless for several hours. A deathlike unconsciousness had saved Group Sergeant Hanna Massey's life.



Hanna Massey awoke to silence, blurred vision, and the smell of blood. When her head cleared, she lifted her body on one elbow and began looking around. The battlefield was strewn with friends and comrades she had served with, all torn, broken, and scattered about like a child's discarded toys.

But Hanna was a well-trained and disciplined German light infantry soldier who had spent time in several war-torn countries, trying to help those struggling for a better life. Careful examination of her body showed that she was not hurt badly. She found a few scrapes, bruises and a black eye, and the pounding in her head meant she might have a concussion. Rubbing her temples, she scanned the area for a radio operator. The radios the soldiers carried in their

biomechanical suits had a limited range, but she hoped to find some resistance fighters close by.

To her dismay, all the personnel were ripped apart so badly that, when she did find a radio operator, the equipment looked nearly as bad as the body. Sitting down and pulling her knees up close to her chest, Hanna sat motionless, trying to work out a course of action.

Hours passed and the sun set. Hanna's headache had abated, and she realized that she could not stay where she was. She pulled herself up, strapped gear and ammunition to her body, and started to walk toward the red base from which the alien tentacle had attacked. She had not gone far when she stumbled over something in the dark. Something odd.

Her flashlight revealed the remains of a partially severed alien body lying in the black dirt. It seemed to still be alive. Hanna immediately aimed her rifle at what she thought was its head and was only a second from pulling the trigger when she noticed a glimmering light coming from the side of the creature's head-like structure.

Where she had focused her rifle seemed to be a solid mass with multiple gold-colored eyes, or what might be eyes. However, the point that glimmered was on the left side of its skull, faintly blinking. "How about that," Hanna muttered to herself in German, "They use electricity, or some kind of light."

The squirming thing seemed to realize that Hanna was speaking. This sent the creature into a convulsion as it tried to defend what was left of its body by forming itself into a weapon.

"Hell no!" Sergeant Massey snarled in the only English expression she knew, and pulled the trigger. The skull shattered, parts of it scattering across the blackened soil. There in the dark, the small glimmering light still blinked. She knelt down beside it and, retrieving a small towel from her pack, wrapped it up and placed it in one of the pockets of her combat gear.

She traveled beside a wide river, keeping to the trees on its banks but occasionally emerging to use her binoculars. The river would take her to the sea, where she hoped to get a closer look at the aliens. After a week of eating carefully rationed packs of food and sleeping under the trees, daylight found her again exposed on an open plain of blackened soil in what had once been farmland outside the Canadian city of Vancouver.

Hanna knew she was close now. She took refuge in a ruined building and peered through binoculars at the decimated city, noting that red alien masses were slowly enveloping the tall buildings. Now and then, one of the buildings disintegrated into rubble under the heavy mass, and Hanna could just make out the movement of aliens scurrying around.

The day was hot, made hotter by the lack of any greenery around her hiding place, but as she traveled, Hanna had been forming a plan to gather intelligence about these aliens. She decided to wait until nightfall, then move in closer and try to photograph and record what was going on in the alien encampment.

Evening found her finishing a small tin of food, then poking and turning the bit of glimmering light that she carried in the towel, trying to decipher its purpose. It was clearly neither mechanical nor biological in nature. All she could determine was that it was alien. This conclusion made her smile, not a common expression on her face. Stuffing away her gear and prepping her weapons, Hanna rose from her hiding place and moved out, aiming toward the city. She stopped a few yards from the damaged building and froze. Slowly she turned her head, scanning the area all around her. Her mind was racing, her heart pounding wildly, her hands cold with fear.

How could she have missed this? She was a fool, and a dead fool at that. Not even trying to raise her weapon, Hanna's shoulders sagged as she realized she was standing in what looked like an alien nesting site. Dug deep into the black dirt all around her were heaps of alien bodies,

occasionally moving, but slowly. Her only thought was to get to the grenade in her pack; she would take as many of them with her as she could. Unslinging the pack from her back, she reached into the pocket for the grenade but instead pulled out the towel with the glimmering light. She again froze, her mind searching. She had been in that building all day. Why hadn't they killed her sooner? The light blinked on.

How had she gotten this close to the alien base? Her thoughts calmed and her mind began working. "The aliens sensed the aircraft that crashed. They knew our positions."

The light must mean something.

Retrieving it from the towel, Hanna held it in her hands and began looking at the aliens. They didn't have glimmering lights on their heads. Not one was attacking her. It was obvious that they could see her. Some even stopped what appeared to be feeding to stare at her, but none moved toward her. Hanna stared directly at an alien that had its arms plunged deep into the ground. A slurping, crunching noise made her turn away. Slowly, air refilled her lungs as her heart slowed its rapid pace. Her mind was clear now.

Gathering her gear and using all her faculties to attempt logical thought, Hanna clutched the glimmering light object tightly in her hand and began walking forward through the darkness, passing pit after pit of aliens slithering in their holes, until she reached the outskirts of the city. None of the aliens paid any attention to her.

"What if the glimmering light fails? What if its power source stops? What then?" Increasing her pace, she made her way to the most densely packed area of the red mass. What she found there stunned her.

From a highway overpass facing the center of the city, several gigantic gaping maws seemed to be ingesting everything brought to them. Like huge, hungry mouths, they gulped down everything from stones to trees and animals, even dead humans, and cars. Debris of all kinds was being fed to them through a conveyor of liquid slime. The sounds were horrendous: grinding and crunching mixed with screeching of metal and the occasional scream of a still living thing.

Clenching her teeth, Hanna resisted the urge to be sick. She imagined killing these aliens and that thought settled her stomach. It made no sense for these aliens to consume everything on the planet, but apparently produce nothing from it. So, what were they doing?

Far out at sea, submarines were firing nuclear weapons at the mass buildup that formed along the beaches. The results shocked Hanna. The missiles impacted relatively close to her, but she suffered no ill effects. The red mass seemed to liquefy and accept the impact, like a gigantic sponge absorbing a bullet. Then the force of the explosion seemed to be directed downward, into the earth, leaving the red mass unaffected.

Hanna spent all night and most of the following day wandering through the city, observing everything that was happening. She found her way to the ocean and stood on the shore, looking back at the devastation and felt a powerful sorrow fill her mind. She began walking south along the beach, heading toward the United States.

After several days, Hanna's face was dirty from the burnt soil blowing loosely in the breeze and sticking to the tears sometimes sliding down her cheeks. She could hardly believe it when she chanced upon a stretch of land not yet consumed by the alien horde. Along the west coast of Washington state, she found herself walking among tall green trees and thick ferns, hardly even realizing that she had made it across the border.

It was odd that nothing was damaged here, she thought, her mind clearing again. There had to be a reason. Sitting on a park bench, Hanna pulled some food from her pack and allowed herself to admire the beauty of the place. Hours later, it dawned on her that she had heard no

sounds except the waves rolling pebbles on the beach. No birds singing, no dogs barking, no small rodents scurrying through the leaves, nothing.

Another thought struck her. It couldn't be possible. But what if it was? During World War II, in Germany, the Nazis had safe places high in the Austrian Alps to hide and rest from the rigors of war. Was this such a place? Quickly she reached into her pack for the glimmering light.

It was still blinking. Satisfied, Hanna set out, very carefully, to explore what was possibly a safe haven for the aliens.

Chapter 10 Conflict behind the lines

Pam A'Ochay found that driving to work today was more stressful than usual. Her mornings had always begun with a crowded traffic commute but now, after the invasion, abandoned cars jammed the roads. She needed to get to the office urgently. Late last night, she'd learned of the German chancellor's television appearance in Europe from the few working internet providers still operating for the media. That something so important to the American people wasn't being televised here seemed simply impossible. When she reached the office building, she didn't try to park in her usual spot; cars littered the parking lots as much as they did the roads.

Pam hurried across the lot, sparing a fleeting thought for her past, so different from her life now. She'd grown up as the typical, innocent, small-town girl-next-door, wanting to be an actor and be funny, maybe like Carol Burnett. But after putting that dream aside in favor of marriage to Dieter and her first child, she decided that a steady job, like news casting, would be a better career. She had moved up the corporate ladder quickly and now was media director for one of America's largest news networks.

She hurried through the revolving door and stopped by the staff room off the lobby to get a coffee from the vending machine. She didn't see, attached to the ceiling above her head, a small gray stain that moved almost imperceptibly. The stain slowly formed itself into something that looked like a cross between a bat and a spider, and extruded a sharp spine-like object from its back. This was one of the small spy organisms roaming the war zone, relaying biological data from kills back to the alien command bases. Pam was about to be this one's next victim. Slowly and with great purpose, the gray wraith began sliding across the ceiling and closing the gap between its menacing blade and Pam's body.

While Pam's attention was focused on retrieving change from her purse, the wraith lowered itself from the ceiling on a glue-like film toward her shoulder, just inches now from the kill. Pam found the final quarter she needed and inserted it into the coffee machine. As the mechanics of the vending machine started up, the little killer spy stopped, seemingly confused and disoriented. As the coffee brewing continued, the electrical frequency generated from this device, purely by chance, began causing the wraith to deform. Reaching for the filled cup, Pam leaned forward just as the little gray spy fell to the ground and degraded into a fully liquid state. Pam stepped on it with her red high-heeled shoes on her way to the elevators.

Unaware of how lucky she'd been, Pam got out at the tenth floor, tossed the empty coffee cup into a nearby trash can, and walked briskly down the familiar halls to the media president's office.

Here she stopped to reinforce her stance by reminding herself of a brief news item from December 2015. Though that was fifteen years ago now, the fact that the media had limited the report to a mere twenty seconds of airtime still infuriated her. Muslim extremists had attacked a bus in Kenya, looking to kill Christians. The Muslims on the bus had protected the Christians, saying, 'Shoot all of us or none of us.'

That year, the far more numerous peaceful Muslims were being attacked everywhere, by people who believed all Muslims had the same values. The media had had the chance to make something out of the Kenya bus story, to exhibit a rational response which could influence events. But they had ignored the opportunity. Well, they always had focused on the bad stuff. Good news apparently didn't sell.

Pam took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and entered the president's office. She found him sitting in a large leather chair, staring out at the ruins across the city. He was a gluttonous waste of a man, the result of years of self-righteous decadence. When he walked, Pam thought it looked like his enormous belly was the main part of him and that it led his head and legs wherever it wanted to go.

"Sir, it's been three days since the Germans landed. We need to air this story," Pam said.

He just sat there, staring out at the destroyed city.

"Please, sir, our soldiers need to know the Germans are here to help us. There have been reports of our boys shooting them in the back. Some are saying that the Germans are somehow responsible for the aliens advancing. We have the whole story here and our military needs to know."

Still no response. Pam said emphatically, "You have a duty to inform the American people."

"Duty... duty! Don't talk to me of duty, you prima donna!" he snarled. His gaze shifted from the window to a photograph hanging next to the many trophies awarded him for truth and integrity in broadcasting. The photo was of prisoners of war, gaunt and obviously starving.

"Let those rat bastards die," the president spat. "Let our troops shoot them in the back, then kill all the aliens on their own, better that way." His voice sounded shrill and insane. "I don't need any advice from the likes of you, either. I know your family's history. Your grandmother was a Nazi sympathizer. Don't know why I ever agreed to bring you on board this company anyway." Words kept flowing from his mouth, but they were garbled now. His voice became more frenzied as he screamed inanities.

Then came the sound of a small pop and the voice stopped.

Pam's eyes filled with tears and a lump formed deep in her throat. It was hard to breathe, and her chest heaved as she stared down at the floor where the president now lay, blood bubbling out of his forehead.

She thought of the small sign on her desk that said, 'Pam A-OK,' a play on her married name of A'Ochay and an unintentional signal that she cared about people. It was true; she always tried to help if she could. New employees often quickly became her friends because of this, and she had been known as Pam A-OK for a long time.

Had she gone too far with this shooting? Maybe. Maybe not, if she could live with it.

Her head began to clear, and she calmly put the small revolver back in her purse. The ugly, ranting voice was silent now, as it should be. She headed down the hall to the elevator and, from there, to the second-floor studio where she told the staff to air the German story. She'd added her own comments and saved it on her pen drive, telling America that she was no longer alone in this fight.

It was late that night when Pam pulled back into her driveway. She noticed, for the first time, that she always parked her car in exactly the same place, though chaos ruled everywhere else. But she had always lived in an orderly way. No matter how bad things were, she kept the house clean and her desk in order.

Her hands shook as she hung up her car keys. She had destroyed that orderliness of mind today by taking a life. Her boss had been a jerk and a fool, but he didn't deserve to die. She resolved, as she changed from work clothes to pajamas and brushed out her long, dark hair, that after the war was over and life returned to some kind of normality, she would admit her crime to the police and accept whatever punishment they meted out.

Pam sat down at her desk and gazed at the picture of her husband. He was a stern-looking man and the biggest influence in her life. A man of integrity, his honesty had been what Pam

found most attractive when they first met. How long since they'd walked together? Their marriage had been very happy until the death of their child cast a shadow over it. He had deliberately broken into his father's locked gun safe and stolen a gun to take to school that day.

Why did the kids of her son's generation find taking weapons to school so attractive? The sorrow surged back into her heart, and she closed her eyes, wishing she could hold her husband's hand and get some comfort from his strength.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes and noticed that her computer was blinking to tell her that she had new e-mail. Pam's e-mail account was always on, always connected to what was happening in the world.

Shortly after yet another crisis in the Middle East had flared up and Europe's mounting debt and inflation threw that area into chaos, the international media agreed there was a need for a special news server that could never be silenced. Dedicated lines were placed, linking all points of the globe to one central news outlet, to ensure that no country could stop the world from finding out that atrocities were being committed in silence. Information flowed constantly, so that the planning necessary to keep the people of the world safe and organized into resistance against evil could easily be done. However, access to the server was limited, and so information was still sometimes difficult to get out.

As Pam flipped through her e-mail, one message caught her eye. It was from Dean, a reporter, and an old friend, asking if she could meet him as soon as possible regarding the military's experimental soldiers. She replied that they could meet tomorrow and then went off to bed, wondering when Dieter could snatch some leave and come home for a little while.



Her sleep that night was fitful, and Pam awoke grumpy and stiff. Her conscience weighed on her like a heavy rough stone. But, finding an e-mail response from Dean, she dressed and drove to meet her friend. Life had to go on.

When they met, Dean said, "Now, Pam, you must understand, the military wants to be forthcoming about this experiment, but they're not sure of the public's reaction, or even how to tell the public."

He was a mousy little person, possibly gay, but Pam never asked about his personal life. She was satisfied with knowing he was a good friend and confidant, and that she could always trust him.

"That's why I wanted you involved," Dean went on. "I've seen what they're working on and, to be honest, this is even weirder than our planet being invaded by aliens." His voice shook ever so slightly, as if he were nervous.

"Not sure if anything could top aliens, Dean, but I'll take your word on that," Pam replied.

They walked up the steps of the large military building and were greeted by a grizzled old general.

"You will not take any recording devices beyond this front entrance," the general said. "You will not speak to anyone working here unless I give you permission. You will not enter any areas not sanctioned by me, and you will not reveal to anyone what you see here, unless I give you authorization to do so. Is that clear?" Before Dean or Pam could reply, the general snapped, "I have little tolerance for your types. In fact, I have found most humans to be a complete waste of oxygen. If this was not important, I would just as soon run both of your asses out of here."

From that point on, Pam welcomed General Harris's silence. After many corridors and

doors, their escort of guards and the general finally entered a white room with a few chairs and a large mirror on one wall.

"Sit!" the general said, then turned and left the room with the guards. Some time passed before the door opened again and a young woman with an armful of office files entered the room and sat down.

"Do you know what stem cells do?" she asked.

"Yes," Pam replied.

"We used a biologically created type of sterile stem cell to introduce specialized DNA strands from certain individuals who retain remnant Neanderthal typologies. We cross those with aggressive strands from some animals and beneficial viruses to create a morphological genotype strand that, when introduced into subjects through a manmade embryonic cell, can cause physical changes to their body plan."

Pam opened her mouth to ask a question, but the young woman continued.

"Once we understood the nature of the DNA strand, and the importance the junk DNA represented to the eventual output of the few bits of code that make up all the structure of a finished organism, we realized that by activating the controller strands, those in turn sent signals to the switching strands. We could reactivate those few bits of DNA code to again reanimate the organism to rebuild itself."

Pam's eyes began to glaze over. She glanced at Dean. He was in the same condition.

The young woman pressed on. "As with the development of an organism in a fetal stage, we needed to essentially kill the subject in order to induce a fetal reanimation of an organism suited to our own needs. Put more clearly, we reintroduced our test subjects to the fetal stage of their original development artificially, to reconstruct their body plan to fit our design of a Hyborg soldier, a cross between a hybrid and a cyborg."

"These changes would normally happen over several generations, but in our present situation, of course, they needed to be accelerated. We used a rare genetic human condition that creates rapid aging in certain individuals in order to induce rapid physiological changes in our test subjects."

Pam was getting more and more frustrated by the rapid delivery. She noticed Dean open his mouth, then close it again.

"Only through intense radiation therapy and a hybrid steroid regimen, have we been successful in mutating our volunteers into an almost catatonic state, making them invulnerable to the mist the invaders produce, and yet they are larger and stronger than any normal human could ever be. They have slightly slower reflexes than a normal human, due in part to their almost death-like state, but be assured, we have found it almost impossible to terminate any of the successful candidates. This is because of their ability to continually repair damaged tissue through the continuously forming stem cells."

The young woman took a breath. "Any questions so far?"

"Holy shit," Pam said. "I think I liked the general better. I could at least understand him."

There was a long uncomfortable pause. The young woman stood up and said, "Maybe it's better if you see this first." She motioned them to look at the wall mirror and, with the flick of a switch, the mirror became a window onto a lab room.

"Oh, my God," Pam said softly. "Are those things alive?"

"Technically yes, but the low functioning of their organs means we need to introduce certain body fluids to keep necrosis from setting in," the young woman said. "We used a virus as a container for specific DNA that we designed, and that virus penetrates the cells where we want

the changes to take place. This creates an almost catatonic state that we regulate with a regimen of advanced drugs grafted into their armor."

"Okay. Look, if you can't speak normal English, can we speak to someone who does?" Pam said. Dean bent his head to hide a smile.

"I'm sorry," the woman replied. "I am trying to be as clear and concise with you as possible, so you can explain this to the public, but perhaps this chance remark will help. One of our test subjects, a man named Dal, often refers to himself and his friend over there as vampires."

On the other side of the window stood two large men, twice the size of the doctors around them. Their skulls, misshapen from biomechanical enhancements, gave them a jigsaw demonic appearance, and their dark, thick skin armor made their appearance even more repulsive.

"What will happen to these men when the war is over?" Pam asked. The men must have volunteered for this experiment, but had they known what would happen to them? Did their families know? Would their families even recognize them now?

The young woman did not reply.

Pam sighed. "I don't think I can explain this at all."

Later, Pam and Dean sat in a cafeteria with the young woman and the general. Pam, clutching her coffee cup tightly, said, "What happens if one of these Hyborgs gets in a fight with an ordinary soldier? The soldier wouldn't have a chance."

The general snorted. "Don't be naive. We've programmed them for obedience."

"Like robots," Dean muttered. "No free will. That sucks."

Pam elbowed him. They were there to get information, not confront the military on questions of ethics. She said to the general, "You said you had to induce rapid aging. Does this mean that they will die sooner than a human?"

General Harris shrugged. "If they die in combat, what's the difference? All I care about is that they take with them as many of those alien rat bastards as they can."

The young woman spoke again. "We are not entirely sure how long they will live, but we do know that without replenishing their blood supply and having them ingest meat, death is a surety. The lack of blood and meat seems to stifle the body's ability to continually produce stem cells. The rapid aging was necessary for their bodies to evolve the desired changes we wanted. The power source to drive the mechanical parts is proprietary and can best be described as a type of star-in-the-jar technology. Once it is activated, the power source has an unspecified longevity."

"This living armor you spoke of earlier; does that mean it's intelligent? Does the armor think, even at a basic level?" Pam inquired.

"Try to regard their armor as much like a turtle's shell, or like your fingernails," the young woman replied. "If it is damaged, the wound self-heals, making the subjects almost impervious to destruction, but there is no sentient thought involved. We are presently working on a companion organism for our Hyborg hyper-hominids. We had some success with dogs being able to detect aliens at a distance, so an electronically linked, mentally compatible extension seemed obvious."

"A what?" Dean asked.

Apparently bothered by her inability to communicate with Pam and Dean, the woman scowled. "We are working with convicts from Megiddo max, who are as yet an unused asset in this battle. We are attempting to alter them into a human/dog-like hybrid, capable of being linked to our new soldiers mentally, much like a bluetooth device for your phone."

"Convicts from Megiddo, Armageddon, the place from the Bible? Like murderers, rapists, and psychopaths, those kinds of convicts?" Dean prodded. Pam thought he looked a little

uncomfortable with this. He probably thought it was sacrilege to have a prison there; he'd want a church.

General Harris snapped, "You and your organization have had no problem reporting on the alien scourge. I'm sure you can report to commanders across the globe on our efforts to help in the war effort. We don't need our own boys shooting at these Hyborg soldiers we send into battle!"

"Wait, the idea of using convicts in battle, especially convicts from the Biblical town of Megiddo, or from Armageddon, as you call it, is just a bit too much to believe. Why convicts from Megiddo?" asked Dean, with a slight tremor in his voice. "You're picking the very worst of the worst."

Pam knew that Dean was a deeply religious man. She was fairly sure that his father had suspected he was a closeted homosexual, for the man sent Dean away to a distant university right after high school. Dean had confided that he found this difficult at first, but soon discovered the university population seemed to accept any and all lifestyles.

"What does it matter where we get the convicts from? These men were accessible for the war effort and easy to obtain from a landlocked area not fully engulfed in the invasion," replied the general with a disdainful look.

"Dean is right," said Pam, realizing that the general was as suspicious as Dean's own father. "You're asking us to report on the things you're doing here. If people learn that these soldiers were once convicts, and convicts from Megiddo, no less, all hell will break loose on this story."

"So don't report that!" snapped General Harris.

The conversation grew stale and soon Dean and Pam were dismissed.

As they walked down the steps, Dean said, "I'm heading for a bar. I'm going to have a few drinks and try to get my brain wrapped around all this technology I never heard of before. Speaking of which, where the hell has the government been hiding it, anyway? And why?"

"Maybe it's not the government," Pam said. "Maybe it's the military."

"Could be. That General Harris seems like the kind of guy that would go for the kind of thing they're doing to people. You coming for a drink?"

"Not me," Pam said. "I'm going straight home."

She spent the rest of the day with her mind reeling in disbelief at the military's unfettered actions. The idea that it had been given free rein to create monsters without the public's involvement seemed unconscionable. However, in times of war, Pam kept telling herself, horrendous things are done in the name of humanity's need to survive.

After all, look at what she had done only yesterday.

Chapter 11 Undead reds

"God damn it, what the hell is it with these Germans?" Thad yelled to the guy next to him in the foxhole. Paratroopers had been dropping from the sky all day and all night, from the one country destined to make a difference. "We're not gonna let them invade us and take over America! Quick! Shoot that one over there too, before he lands." The impact to Thad's helmet from the back was so hard that he almost blacked out.

"You stupid shit!" his corporal screamed. "What the hell are you doing? Stop shooting them! They're here to help us. Try to use your brain just this once, you idiot!"

As Thad's head cleared and his ears stopped ringing, he looked back, behind the corporal, behind their front line that faced the alien menace. German troops were landing there and, as soon as they landed, they were in motion. Now they were passing Thad, crossing the front lines, moving at blitzkrieg speed toward the stunned and scattering aliens.

It was this defining moment of fearlessness that caused the Americans to begin the surge forward, instead of backward. Abandoning the civilians they had tried to shield from the alien onslaught, American soldiers joined the German troops and began a tactic of hit-and-run fighting in wolf packs that seemed to work very well. The aliens fought like rabid dogs; they made no distinction between soldier and civilian. They did not seem to sleep, and they would attack anything, even cars and mailboxes.

The real war began that day; no more ground would be given. The first of the world's alliances in this war had formed and was stalling alien superiority.

The following week started like a rally on the stock markets, everyone scurrying about, excited about the turn of events. German and American forces, joined by what remained of the Canadian troops, were now coalescing into an effective wall of military might that seemed to stall the invading scourge, which so far had been unstoppable. Some parts of the globe had been hit especially hard in the first few weeks of chaos, including Canada, one of three major landing points for the aliens. Little could be done now to stop the advance on Canadian soil, so it was deemed best to add the Canadian strength to the fight on American soil.

By Friday, it was obvious that those invaders being crushed by the united military front were the most expendable troops the aliens had. Even so, the standard alien soldier was difficult to stop. Its body was enveloped in some kind of semi-transparent goop, allowing the more solid center to move forward and form into a variety of weapons. Their most popular weapon was like porcupine quills, which were fired into enemy combatants. It took a concentration of gunfire centered on the solid parts of the aliens to have any real effect in killing them, while all the time the human soldiers tried to avoid being skewered by flying quills or directed rods resembling spears. If an alien soldier managed to get close to a human soldier, it would try to tear the human to pieces.

Reports started trickling into command headquarters of large objects moving toward the united forces. These large aliens, or alien machines, now moving slowly toward the new front lines looked like they'd be even more impossible to stop.

"I heard they were about twenty or thirty feet tall," Thad said to one of the young Canadians.

"Where did you hear that?" Jeff was a tall, skinny farm boy from central Canada. He often described his home as the wheat belt.

"One of the chopper pilots was out on a reconnaissance mission and said he saw the damn things moving, maybe a hundred of them."

Jeff felt uneasy. Surviving for this long had been hard and the thought of facing something even more devastating was almost unbearable. He shifted, trying to find a more comfortable place behind the overturned cars and trucks being used as fortification. "Back on the farm, we got these critters called ground hogs that would eat a whole crop in a week. We found the only way to stop them was to flood the fields. Maybe we could do that here. They can't advance if they got no grip, right?"

Thad said, "Maybe when one of the generals walks past, we should mention it."

One of the German troops approached out the darkness and said, "I just hear, one of the big aliens he maybe fell over a nuclear missile silo. Big explosion. Command say the aliens stopped and they seem confused."

Thad let out a whoop. "Maybe we can just nuke them, saves us having to fight."

"Nein, they not die, just stop," the young German said.

The youthful conversation carried on far into the night and in the morning the three were still clustered together behind their bunker of cars and trucks when a Major General with a grim expression emerged from a command tent barely fifty feet from their position. He hurried past them and into an older building, to a command room occupied by other high-level brass.

The morning news revealed that the large aliens had resumed their slow and methodical march toward the stalled front lines. The ineffectiveness of aircraft was discussed, as well as the lesson learned from nuclear weaponry. Though the arguing went on for some time, the next step was clear. These new aliens were very different from what had been faced before, and no one knew whether or not they could be stopped. There was only the glimmer of hope that a surprise explosion of tremendous force like the one that had just happened would be an effective tactic.



Charger sat polishing and adjusting his plasma swords, while he listened to a newscaster summarizing the early weeks of the war. "Humanity had few choices after the attack started," the newsman said, "and we could not help feeling that using any weapon, no matter what, was preferable to defeat. Most of our cities fell victim almost at once to the mist the invaders generated, a biological weapon that first terrorized humans, then turned them into rotting corpses."

Charger shrugged. This was old news.

"Government arms like the Federal Emergency Management Agency, formed to help survivors of catastrophes, were faced with hellish chaos and were quickly overworked and understaffed. No cataclysm ever imagined by civic planners could have prepared rescuers for the millions of corpses piling up in the streets of cities and small towns on every coastline in the world."

Charger knew about those. He'd seen them.

The newsman continued. "Our military at first mounted a brilliant defense, actually forcing the alien invaders to scatter. But the aliens regrouped and again began generating the mist that killed hundreds of thousands. The force of the invaders was so strong that dead bodies piled up in the streets faster than they could be put into graves."

"Accurate tallies of those killed by the mist are available," Charger muttered, "so why doesn't this guy use them? As of yesterday, it was 53,677,431 in America. My brain maybe doesn't work as fast as it used to, but I'm still good at math." He focused again on the opinion piece.

"The alien tactics are random, difficult for military minds to understand," said the newsman. "The thought processes of the invaders seem to bear no resemblance to the chess game of strategy, but are more like chaos theory run amuck. And, most puzzling, every time these creatures leave an area, all plant life has been wiped out, leaving not a single root or seed; nothing but the dirt. These invaders apparently don't want our home; they only want to ensure that humanity will not survive. The question is, why?"

Charger shut off the radio. "Maybe the aliens figure we're too much of a nuisance to live. Anyway, they were going to attack sooner or later." Nobody seemed to understand that broadcasting Earth's position to the universe through radio waves would someday invite aliens to attack. Then, when world leaders finally clued in, they thought switching all Earth's transmissions to digital would somehow cancel out the previous years of broadcasting the planet's strengths and weaknesses.

The signal for boarding the plane sounded and Charger lumbered to his feet and headed for the tarmac to join the 92nd flight brigade for a jump into hostile territory. His swords felt comfortable and deadly in his hands. Many of the Hyborgs now used only the technologically advanced swords, rather than the weapons ordinary soldiers used. They were much better than bullets for killing aliens. Also, their heavy body armor combined with the leg and arm enhancements made moving and fighting the things almost a snap.

Charger bared his fangs in a grimace of satisfaction. He'd seen several weeks of intense fighting since his conversion had been completed and so far, the humans were holding their ground. The aliens tried to emulate the humans in both combat and design, but they didn't seem to have any idea what they were doing. He'd seen one of them try to form itself into a human as camouflage and had concluded their vision must be way off. Its interpretation was roughly the outline of a soldier, but the texture was like that of a wet, wrinkled dishcloth. Maybe because their own outsides seemed to be made of goop.

Still, in spite of their mistakes, the aliens had gained ground, pushing survivors into smaller and smaller areas. That is, until the Hyborgs began fighting. Charger had been glad to see converts from other countries joining the ranks. Now they were all packed into aircraft flying high above the mass of alien invaders below.

Charger drew back his lips again in what passed for a smile. The aliens had no idea what kind of hell was about to descend on their encampments. When the green light came on, signaling it was time to jump, he was first to go. The rest were pushing from behind and leapt out so fast that the aircraft quickly gained altitude. Descending through the darkness, he felt no fear. Being undead had eliminated fear.

He landed hard and, with the other Hyborgs behind him, swept forward through the alien camp. His blades swept and sliced, while a weird screaming or sizzling came from the butchered and dying enemy combatants.

Charger covered ground fast. He had killed maybe fifty aliens when he found Dal lying on the ground in two pieces. Dal was still moving and trying to somehow pull himself together to continue the fight.

A large green and black alien was moving through the ranks, hacking and slicing human soldiers in half. With no hesitation, and his speed increasing with each stride, Charger closed ground on the alien. Raising one sword high and leaping into the air, he came crashing down on it. As he stabbed the sword deep inside its surface, parts sheared off, but the alien kept advancing, seemingly oblivious to the assault. Sometimes Charger was slashing through liquid as hard parts gave way and the footing became treacherous, but he didn't stop.

The alien turned to attack Charger directly and, for a brief moment, their eyes met. It had more eyes than he did. These multiple eyes were gold in color, but they were definitely eyes and they showed fear. Charger smiled, revealing all four of his fangs.

One of those fangs already had a chip in it. Not from the war, though. He and Dal had gone on leave right after their conversion. They had been trained electronically how to fight and survive and their size had doubled, so they were impressive soldiers. But they were never taught how to go home.

He'd been so eager to see Beth that he never thought about how she'd react to his appearance. The strain of war had affected the way she looked, too. Her hair was lank, she had lost weight, and her face was almost gray. But it was the eyes, those clear, beautiful ice blue eyes, that told the story. She was afraid of him now. That hurt, after all they'd meant to each other.

The villagers donated blood and meat, but he could read the fear in their faces, too. But he was glad he'd been converted to a Hyborg so that he could kill aliens. And what made it even better was that now he lived without fear. So, when the guy at the bar that night swung a baseball bat into his mouth, he decided to show them what fear really meant. He'd wanted to kill. But he couldn't. He had beat the shit out of those guys, but he couldn't take the final step. It was like the conversion had done something to his brain.

He only went home once after that. They didn't understand what he'd sacrificed so that they all had a chance to live. But so what?

They gave him some blood and meat, so what?

He could die in battle, anyway. What did they know? He missed Beth, but she was better off without him. She'd find someone else.

Charger felt good, driving his sword through the head plate of the alien monster, seeing the gold fade from its multi-faceted eyes. The soldiers he fought with cheered his audacity and the thought of Beth faded.

He yelled at the monster, "Look at me, you bastard! Look at me! Keep your fucking eyes open. I want you to see me as you die." When the last of the gold faded from its eyes, Charger smiled again, revealing all four fangs, three whole, one chipped.

He took Dal's body back home a few days later. His mother didn't recognize her own son and rejected the corpse. Charger knew then that the Hyborgs would be forever outside of humanity, looking in. But he could live with that. He'd always lived with that, in one way or another.



Life in Russia had been especially hard during the invasion. While Germany rushed to the aid of America, Russia stood mostly alone. Refugees poured in daily, seeking refuge as the European countries quickly fell. India, China, and other Asian countries followed suit. The alien invasion was global. No country was spared, and many were overrun in a matter of days. By the end of that first chaotic week, the aliens' red mass and their poisonous mist covered a third of the world's landmass.

The Russians used traditional and surprisingly effective tactics. They relied on the scorched-earth approach, used in World Wars I and II. As they retreated, they burned all the resources, leaving nothing for the enemy to consume. This confused and delayed the invaders, since they seemed to require the resources usually left behind, even though they destroyed them in the end.

Russia had for years been working on their own method for repulsing possible alien invaders and their intelligent biological metals proved difficult to defeat. This smart-metal, first developed in the 1970s, had long been merely experimental, though the military was eager to use it. If they could create perfect soldiers, bonded with this living metal skin, no one would be able to defeat the Russians. America knew of the experiments but took a different approach. Where Russia had tried to encase the soldier in ununseptium, element 117, considered a member of the poor metals group on the elements chart, similar to aluminum, America used it as only part of the living armor for the Hyborgs.

Lieutenant General Mikhail Kalashnikov was placed in charge of the Russian super-soldier program in 1947 and became the driving force behind the smart-metals program. But it was his successor, Colonel Vladimir Pushkin, who won the first victory in 1972 by bonding element 117 to animals. Pushkin and his scientific team came up with some revolutionary ideas. They experimented with small rodents at first, bonding limited smart-metals most often only to the backbone, but these did serve as test cases for further study. The metals were 'smart' in that they could self-repair quickly, sometimes in seconds, acting as both a barrier to penetration and as a patch to prevent the body from bleeding out.

The real problem the scientists faced was how to encase a soldier's full body in this living armor and still maintain his ability to breathe and move. This was not easy to do. Lungs needed to expand the chest to function, and a chest wrapped in metal is restricted in its movement. Then they had to overcome the increased weight of the soldier and the radioactivity of the element. Initially they covered the first few human soldiers in hundreds of small flexible steel plates that made them look like human disco balls. However, the test subjects died of skin diseases and radiation poisoning, and the project was shelved until the alien invasion.

The Russian program had a simpler approach than the American Hyborg program. The humans in the Russian program were unaltered at the genetic level, and not enhanced to withstand the deadly poisonous mist. It was soon learned that through manipulating the smart-metals in their molecular state, a stable and less radioactive compound could be quickly developed. It had the added benefit of being lighter in weight, showing that its connection to aluminum was not just an accident. The odd thing that resulted from this new process was that the smart-metals took on a deep reddish color and, as a result, the Russian super-soldiers became known as the Russian Blood Brigade.

Ivan was an unremarkable kid from a school in the small town of Tura. Tura was located in the middle of Russia and, during the first few days of the invasion, certainly the safest place to be. Colonel Pushkin's original team of scientists was quickly reassembled and sent to Tura to restart the super-soldier program. By now, the Russian micro-engineering and biological enhancements program for strength and endurance had made impressive advancements, and many of the problems the team faced back in the seventies were easily overcome. One of these problems had been the lack of test subjects but now volunteers for the adaptation program were storming the gates. These brave young people were willing to sacrifice everything to save Russia and its people.

Ivan was one of the first kids to volunteer, against his parents' wishes.

"I understand most of our forces are retreating from the coasts," one of the new recruits said to Ivan as he and several other candidates sat in an office on the new military base, waiting to see if they could join the Blood Brigade.

"I heard we are advancing on the enemy in a new direction, which just happens not to be the direction the enemy expects us to fight in," Ivan replied, with a gentle laugh.

"That could be true," the other recruit replied, joining in on the laughter. "What better strategy for our forces than to lure them into Poland or Europe, then let those countries deal with the invaders?"

A tall doctor entered the office and picked a few volunteers to follow him into the examination rooms. There they sat naked, as nurses and doctors poked and prodded them. Many questions were asked of Ivan. He responded willingly and quickly, hoping that he would be picked, and he was.

The process to become a super-soldier carried many risks. It had been made clear to the young volunteers that some might not survive it, but this didn't deter their enthusiasm. Posters had been placed everywhere, advertising the super-soldier, showing a blood-red metal cyborg Russian crushing the head of an imaginary alien. The poster soldiers were not even close to how the volunteers would eventually look. Being encased in a smart-metal suit didn't do much for the design of the human body. The original flexibility was lost, creating a more rigid body. Fingers lost some dexterity, arms and legs flexed very little, and the candidates would never sit down again, as the back was locked rigid to carry the weight. It was difficult to kill a Blood soldier, but not impossible, and death meant entombment in a casing of red metal.

The process of conversion itself was relatively painless. Skin was replaced with smart-metals in a way that made volunteers look like Egyptian mummies. Many bodily functions were affected, yet after a few days, a super-soldier ready for battle emerged excited and full of spirit, willing to fight invaders. The program expanded to all of Russia, as thousands of volunteers swelled into millions. No volunteer was ever refused, and those who did not survive were reprocessed into usable materials for other candidates.

Ivan, like the other new recruits, required no training. They were pointed at the enemy, then let loose like dogs. They tended to mob an invader, defeating it by mass assault. The poisonous mist was made harmless through simple rebreathers bolted to the soldiers, but this was only a temporary stopgap, for the poison did eventually find its way into their lungs.

During a fight close to the Chinese border, the Russian Blood Brigade encountered the Hyborgs of Asia. They were a small group led by a commander named Chang, who carried three swords but no guns. This group preferred close quarters combat with the invaders. Though the Russians were pleased to add these odd-looking human combatants to their ranks, they were less than impressed that the Chinese no longer had a home to defend.

The soldiers fought bravely, but after several months, Russia was losing the war. The Chinese Hyborgs spoke of the alliance between the Germans and the Americans. No one could keep a secret from China. Its spies had long penetrated several levels of world governments, so when the war started, they too began experimenting with Hyborgs of similar design and construction to those the Americans had developed.

Ivan had survived long enough to get a small command of his own, seven men and five women, and they were joined with the remainder of the Chinese Hyborgs. The group numbered twenty in total and had perfected its fighting skills. It was the most lethal Russian combat group in their area; Ivan had received many medals for valor.

"Gear up, meat balls," Ivan shouted to his small group. "Command has a new objective for us. Seems they're not happy we lost so much ground. They have decided to send us ahead to find a possible weak point to hit, maybe cause a little confusion."

"Just send Stinky here into the fight, the aliens will certainly retreat from his body odor." Natasha laughed as she shoved hard on Mikhail's shoulder, trying to put some distance between them.

"Laugh now, woman, but you will be begging me for a little more odor when those aliens have you by the panties!" Mikhail said sternly.

"Shut it, you monkeys! We have to report to the command tent in ten minutes." Ivan grabbed the gear he would need for another kick at the enemy.

The tent was quiet as the small group entered. Gathered inside were many soldiers and officers of the Russian Blood Brigade, all focused on small video monitors set up around the large tent. On the screens were images of the aliens, speaking to the cameras of captured reporters in a language no one understood. But the images were easy to interpret. They were holding the President of Russia captive. Three aliens yelled into the cameras while one of them created a weapon of glowing hot plasma and began slowly burning the neck of the Russian President. The man screamed in agony as his head was slowly removed from his body. It fell, with a sickening thump, on the ground where he knelt. The soldiers were first shocked, then outraged. Cries of revenge filled the air.

"Seems to me that Russia has followed China," Chang said to Ivan. "Guess we're both on the losing side. Maybe we should take what little we still have and head to America. Reports say they are holding their ground, thanks to the Germans."

"Americans!" spat Ivan. "I think I would rather go to hell first!"

Russia fell and disaster after disaster ravaged the country. Within days, the remaining Russian and Chinese fighters boarded planes and flew to America over the North Pole, as their civilians massed in the frigid north, joining the civilians of the west, abandoning their motherland to the invaders.

Survivors from all over the world were migrating to the poles of Earth; the cold areas seemed to be the one place where the invaders did not attack. Every day more and more soldiers poured into General Harris's command, and he sent them into battle with little regard for the outcome. He didn't care about the humans. He only cared about the results that the Grays sought.

With the loss of their country, the Russians on American soil gave up the term Blood Brigade and adopted the term 'undead reds.' They were now the walking dead, all that was left of what had once been Mother Russia.

Chapter 12 A new fighting machine

A tremendous explosion made Charger's ears ring, and part of his side armor had been burned thin. "Stupid humans dropped another nuke," he yelled.

Chang, fighting next to him, said in his best broken Chinese-English, "Yah, I think I hate those guys."

"Really! And all along I thought it was just me." Charger laughed and pulled his sword from another sizzling, screaming alien body. It amused him to fight next to converts from other countries. Their body forms were so much stranger than his, and their living armor was a mess. Chang spoke bad English but was a good fighter. Much thinner than the American Hyborgs, he was also shorter by a few inches, but still heads taller than any humans. He carried three swords and often said, with a snicker, "Number three for mother-in-law."

Charger wasn't entirely sure that the humans were still on his side. Toward the high point of the invasion, they were relying a lot on the 'nuke option.'

"Nukes no stop invaders, neither," Chang said. "Mostly just cook us like choy." Choy was what they had started calling cooked meat, choy and spooage, that was meat and blood. Charger felt hip as hell having his own slang.

At least there weren't that many nukes. Most of the ones that did make it to Earth were launched from ships and subs located far out at sea to avoid the alien tentacles reaching out to destroy them. Missiles launched from these vessels had to run a gauntlet of alien spaceships in orbit waiting to destroy them with pulse weapons.

Charger and Chang had been assigned to the 25th combat group, a platoon of two hundred newly created Hyborgs now stuck fighting the largest alien masses so far seen. Three of these gigantic masses were bearing down on their position that day, and they had been assigned to hold the center mass from advancing on a city occupied by refugees and soldiers. The mass was simply incredible, bigger than most of the buildings behind them and it moved forward with ground-shaking thumps. They quickly learned that getting close to it was a bad idea, so they waited till the alien troops dropped from the mass to the ground to fight. Then they would focus, in pairs, on slashing and killing those that approached.

However, even after a full day of fighting, alien troops were still dropping from the mass. But Chang seemed to have spotted something; he motioned to Charger to follow him. "Look, mass move forward on five legs, but leg number five not like others."

Charger stared at this leg, which seemed the size of a battleship.

Chang said, "Look at leg, it never leave ground."

"You called me over for this?" Charger asked. "What's your point?"

"The leg," Chang reiterated. "Mass move forward, but number five leg never leave ground. Other four do."

Charger decided the last nuke must have hit a little too close to Chang's head; he really wasn't making much sense. Then he realized that the fifth leg never left the ground because it was attached to something below the surface.

He moved dirt away from behind the leg and found a thick red root maybe three feet down, slithering forward along with the mass. "Oh hell, you think it's like an extension cord or something?"

Chang shrugged. "Cut and find out." They both started hacking madly at the red root. The

mass shuddered and stopped. The aliens that had been dropping into combat all day suddenly stopped dropping on the defending platoon and started dropping in huge numbers toward Charger and Chang.

"Yep," Charger yelled, "An extension cord for sure." It was a big relief when their platoon comrades noticed the change in battle and rushed to their aid. The leader radioed to main headquarters, which then called for an air strike on this new finding. The Hyborgs scattered to get out of the way. The center one of the three masses was the first to stop. The air strike on the fifth leg severed the connection between the mass and its coastal alien base, stopping it dead in its tracks. Unfortunately, the discovery came too late for the 7th and 13th undead platoons attacking one of the other alien siege towers, as the barrage of covering human gunfire focused fire on just the one central target. This lack of coverage resulted in the destruction of both undead groups.

The center mass stopped only as long as it took the red tentacle to reattach itself to the fifth leg, then started moving toward the city again. Command was made aware of that fact just after General Harris's lack of foresight, or lack of caring, wiped out half of the existing forces on the American side.

Undeterred by the human devastation, Harris ordered three of the newest attack bombers to strike the weakness of the red roots with guided bunker buster munitions. These three new bomber aircraft were the most technologically advanced aircraft America had ever produced. They were shaped like a triangle and roughly the size of a World War II P-51 Mustang. The surface was black and had no visible controls. Instead, it used micro-metallic feathers all over its surface, which moved in unison to direct the airflow over the surface. This gave the small bomber-fighter craft amazing ability to maneuver, making it impossible for the alien invaders to bring it down.

"Holy sheep dip!" Chang screamed at Charger over the screech of the three small bombers. "What a rush!" A great laugh erupted from deep inside his battered and bloody body.

When the bombs hit the target, they first dug deep into the earth before exploding. Once ignited, the ground rose dramatically, heaving upward like a gigantic breathing chest. The explosion didn't break the surface, but vaporized everything in its path, thus creating a gigantic hollow sphere underground. This completely severed the connection of the alien mass from its command structure. The heaving of the surface toppled the mass forward, where it crashed down upon the attacking soldiers, wiping out another platoon of German and American commandos.

General Harris, apparently pleased with the results, repeated the same order for the second and third masses attacking his position, achieving the same results, wiping out the invaders, but killing thousands of human soldiers. Once the battle ended, General Harris sent word to the leaders of other battles raging in America, telling them how to stop and bring down these new alien siege weapons.

Chang and Charger walked through the fields of dead and dying back to the command base, hearing the cries and begging of the human soldiers, but powerless to do anything about them. From that day forward, Charger regarded General Harris as a war criminal. But Command continued to rely on him to guide the war.

In the weeks following, Charger and Chang heard from Command the rumor of a new type of fighting alien, the Shillelagh. They soon saw it in action.

The Shillelaghs were larger than most of the aliens that had come before. They moved like a blur in the mist they emitted, making it hard to get a fix on them, and consisted of two parts. The solid part seemed to move around inside the liquid part as it advanced toward them. With a

sound like the scraping of steel chains against a metal deck, the solids appeared through the semi-transparent part only long enough to move forward. Then the solid part would disappear behind the liquid part, then back again to form a solid, which made it blur to the eye as it shifted from side to side. Its one weakness was its eyes. Charger found they were always visible, those gold, reflective multi-faceted eyes, looming out of the mist toward him.

"Bitch!" Charger heard Chang exclaim. "Three Shillelaghs move into our five o'clock, ten yards out and closing." Charger turned off the detector, which was clicking a signal on his wrist computer, and they both crouched into a guarded stance, awaiting the approach of the three invaders.

The mist began to engulf them and, as a result, Charger's eyepiece switched to infrared mode, then to motion mode, to help him find his prey. But this did not turn out to be an ordinary fight. The first of the three Shillelaghs struck him and snapped his sword in two before he felt the piercing heat of its body-formed weapon slice through his shoulder. Bewildered, he lurched backward, trying to reach the broad axe strapped to his back. Then he realized that Chang was fighting the other two, and not doing well.

Like two cats toying with a mouse in the middle, they kept slicing piece after piece off Chang as he swung his sword wildly, trying to find some sort of weakness in their armor. An impact to the axe strapped to Charger's back sent him hurtling like a rag doll over an embankment and down into a fast-flowing river. He gasped for air as he floundered around, seeking the shore. When he was back on dry land, he gathered his senses and again reached for his axe.

Only then did he realize his arm had been sliced to the bone and hung at his side. His arm enhancements were sparking and short-circuiting, holding his arm tight to his body. He tried to compose himself and, stumbling forward, tripped over a large portion of Chang's body. Looking up at the mist now moving away from him, he could just make out the three Shillelaghs darting into a line of Australian army recruits and destroying them as easily as if they were just paper held to a raging fire.

He needed to help them. He needed to fight, but the wet mud at his feet made it hard to climb the embankment. Turning and running downstream, he finally found a path upward. He reached the top and found shredded human corpses and the stench of gunpowder. Stumbling over spent ammunition and broken bits, he staggered forward to rejoin the fray, only to see the Shillelaghs vanish over the horizon.



Charger had been at the medical center for a few weeks, being patched together, when one of the doctors there suggested that he could have an upgrade. He thought about it for a bit, and then remembered Chang. He had traveled this far from humanity, what was a bit farther going to matter? So he said yes.

"This will be a new symbiotic addition, not new living armor," one doctor said. "The upgrades are internal to you, like adding blue tooth. You're going to be linked mentally with a Lycan counterpart."

"All the same to me, doc," Charger replied. "Go nuts."

"Nurse, prep him for tomorrow morning. Charger, try to get some rest. You will need all your strength," the doctor said before he left the room.

Charger knew what Lycans were. The first ones had been small, nasty things, plain black in

color and hard to control. Charger had seen a few trainers turned into chew toys and it made him giggle. It was only after the red hybrids, where canine DNA was blended with primate DNA, and then blended with humans, that effective Lycans were created. Dal had called them werewolves. That was because he read too many comic books.

Lycans were about the size of a large man and could stand upright, with arms and legs a little bit splayed out. But it was no 'dog head on a human body' thing like in the movies. These were twisted, fur-covered humans with vicious fangs and claws, who hunched forward a little when they walked but ran on all fours like a chimp. They were good hunters, not surprising for something that looked more like a wolf than a human, and this hunting trait was valuable because the aliens did a lot of their fighting underground. They howled like wolves, too; he'd heard them a few times. He'd heard also that the best way to control a Lyncan was to make it psychologically part of you, so you didn't end up as a chew toy.

His upgrade turned out to be unique. His brain was fitted with not one but two additional biomechanical core stems, which were then linked mentally to two Lycans, each with a very different disposition.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

What kind of people would volunteer to be Lycans? Well, I'm not sure that many did. I suspect General Harris and his underlings decided who was going to volunteer.

No, you're right, the difference between volunteering and being volunteered is not exactly subtle. But General Harris had a war to win, and he didn't care how he did it.

Here, I'll give you the histories of the two Lycans, Mac and Jill, who were hooked up mentally with Charger and you can decide for yourself what happened.

Mac wrote his will in 2025, before he was taken from Megiddo Max to the lab where he was converted to a Lyncan as part of the military's experiments to create powerful infantry weapons in case of war.

The world is mad, but I am sane.

This is the Last Will and Testament of Mac von Shallow. I, Mac, do hereby bequeath all my worldly possessions to my rat, Felix. Felix has been a good companion over these few years in prison. I would just like to state for the record that both Felix and I are fully responsible for all the deaths we have caused. I would also like to take this opportunity to write down my life story, and Felix's, too.

My grandfather was a Jew in Germany in World War II, and my grandmother was part of the Hitler youth. She was responsible for turning my grandfather in to the SS and he was imprisoned until things got bad for Germany. Then he was drafted and sent to Russia, where he was shot, captured, and placed in a Russian prison until late 1955. He returned to Germany to find that my grandmother had taken his only son to America.

My father was a violent man, who took great joy in torturing and killing trespassers who unfortunately found their way to our country property. He refused to have any contact with my grandfather. This selfish attitude meant that not only did I never have the opportunity to meet my grandfather, I also felt it was my duty to avenge all the wrongs ever committed against him. My mother was a schizophrenic, with a passion for sleeping with as many strange men as she could find. My father was often responsible for the deaths of these unlucky men. I finally found it

necessary to end both their lives to give myself some sense of peace.

I am however quite sane, and cognizant of all my faculties. I have been in prison these past five years. I don't mind, now, admitting to another crime of which I am quite proud, killing two men in Germany. To say that these men deserved to die for their crimes against humanity is not an exaggeration, for they were clearly the two post guards of my grandfather's prison in Germany. My only regret in this instance is that the hours I spent removing the flesh from them were too short.

My years in solitary confinement in Megiddo Max over these last few years have shown me that I am not the monster the media has made me out to be. I am in fact just the opposite, a saint. I have been described in the news as unfeeling, cold, calculating, intelligent and ruthless, but my pet Felix will surely testify to the opposite. As for the killings of the supposedly innocent victims in the night club, the tour bus, and the grade school in Berlin, let me assure you that they were all sons and daughters, or grandsons and granddaughters, of German war criminals. As for the deaths of the three prisoners who were responsible for having me put in solitary confinement, I will state for the record that had they chosen not to interfere with the library privileges that I worked so hard to get, they would still be breathing.

As for the killing of the police officers who, in their attempt to capture me, made the mistake of surprising me in my home, that was simply an accident. I have no malice toward the police. I just think that, in the future, it should be made policy for them to knock before entering anyone's home. Finally, regarding the death of my psychiatric officer, I would like to say that had she run a little faster, she might have survived.

In conclusion, I freely and willingly give my body to science in hopes that it can do good toward the liberation of our planet from the Nazi curse and ensure the survival of the human race.

He remembers his childhood.

"Jew boy, Jew boy, such a stupid hat for a Jew boy," was the mildest of the taunts caterwauled by the school kids at recess as they shoved and pushed me back and forth from one kid to another. When I lost my footing and fell to the ground, the kids would kick and spit on me. I never cried, never told the teachers. Instead, I would wait till each kid was alone, then seek revenge. I often carried a small sharp rock in my pocket and, when I had beaten the kid to the ground, would scratch a sign into his chest or back. A sign from God that only he could understand. I never had friends and didn't care. As I grew older, the other kids avoided me and often joked with each other about never walking alone or 'Mac might get you.' My name thus became the new school term for Satan.

He snaps.

I was fifty-five when I accepted my destiny. It happened on a Tuesday, after coming home from work. I had had an extremely trying day dealing with other trades people who were unwilling to work with me in completing the installation of a mechanical system for a new office building in Berlin. I decided to take the next day off but, as that day arrived, so did all my rage. It might have ended quietly but, as I drove to my favorite restaurant in a quiet neighborhood on the west side of Berlin, a passing driver cut me off in traffic and, when I honked my horn, flipped me off with a finger.

I felt no emotion, I drove home, packed a large hockey bag with weapons and sat in my car. Then I realized I had no idea where this other driver might live. Looking out the window of my

car, I stared for some time at kids in the school yard across the street. Then, I retrieved the bag from the car and walked toward the school.

Jill's graduation party

"Hey, Jill, you going to the party on Saturday?" asked Ken. Ken was the typical football jock from gym class and really had a thing for Jill.

"I might, just depends on what my mom says," Jill replied, not wanting to show too much interest in Ken. There were only a few American kids in Berlin in those relatively peaceful years before the alien war began. Most were from military families and a few from science families. Jill's folks were pastors stationed there for the troops.

Ken liked that Jill seemed to have a bit of a wild streak to her nature. She often wore dark Goth clothing and makeup in school.

She often had to leave home dressed like a princess, but during class hours, all bets were off. It had been difficult at first for her to fit into the rigors of school life in Berlin but the fact that Ken was interested in her and very popular with the other kids did help a lot.

This was just another typical day for young minds as they filed from one class to another, so they ignored the strange man who entered the school just before lunch. The bell rang and the few American kids made their way to the same table where they always congregated, chatting about this teacher or that. Thus, it went unnoticed that this strange but ordinary-looking man moved from door to door, closing and locking them, sealing in the two hundred or so students eating their lunches.

Without warning, a gun shot rang out and a student slumped forward lifeless at a lunch table. Stunned silence followed, then horrific screams as students panicked and tried running from the room.

As if in slow motion, the man moved from student to student, shooting them or slicing at them with a sinister long blade fashioned to the butt end of his rifle. He looked like such an unassuming individual, quite ordinary in appearance and height, but he moved calmly, taking deliberate aim to eradicate all other life in the room. Ten, then twenty, children fell to the floor lifeless as the remaining kids scattered in small groups around the room, desperate to find a way to escape. Ken grabbed Jill and shoved her into a small metal serving cart, then pushed it to one side of the room. After only a few yards the cart slowed and, from a small crack in the corner of the cart, Jill could see Ken's lifeless body splayed across the floor.

Fifty, then one hundred, children fell, bodies piling up around the room, the floor red with blood. Some tried to defend themselves, but the man just kept advancing, kept shooting. Most fell to their knees and cried for their lives to be spared, but the man took no notice and, one by one, they continued to die.

Jill watched in horror as the last few children dropped to the ground lifeless. Her breathing almost stopped as she waited to be discovered. Then, when the last child died, the man served himself a cup of coffee and sat down. Leaning back in the chair, he called out, "You can come out now, I'm done."

Jill was silent.

"Hey, girl, you in the cart, I saw you go in there, you can come out now."

Jill was still silent.

The man grabbed a fork from the table and threw it at the cart, hitting the thin metal door, which sent out a ping.

Jill screamed.

"What's the matter, Duchess, no speaky the English?" demanded the man. "I said I'm done. You better come out, or I will start again, on you this time."

Shaking violently, Jill slowly emerged from the small cart and found herself surrounded by dead bodies. "I'm American," Jill said in a voice that was almost a whisper.

"What's that?" demanded the man, staring at the trembling girl.

"I'm American," Jill said again, crying as she trembled.

"American, you say. Well, hell, this is your lucky day then. Come here, sweetheart, and have a seat," the man said, with a hint of emotion in his voice for the first time. He was pleased that the girl was not one of those Germans he hated so much.

Jill could not move; she was barely able to stand.

The man said, "Damn, looks like you pissed yourself. Better lose those leggings before the police get here. We don't want the media to take pictures of an American girl pissing herself." The man's face no longer held any hint of emotion.

As if in a dream, Jill did as she was told. She removed her soiled leggings and then stood silent as if partly dead herself. And there they remained, the man drinking his coffee and the Goth girl, now dead inside, simply standing, until the noise of police involvement came from beyond the lunchroom door.

As the door burst open and police stormed into the room yelling, the strange man turned to the still girl and said, "Don't be like me, be worse."

Jill crumpled to the floor.

She was still in a coma when the aliens attacked Earth and was chosen for the Lycan program because of her low brain activity. The conversion to Lycan was easy for Jill for she no longer registered any feelings of pain. The day she was revived and linked to Charger, the girl Jill was buried so deep inside that Lycan body that it seemed as if she no longer existed.

But what came from her body then was pure hell on earth and, with all the muscle enhancement she had, hell was a safer place to be.



When Charger awoke from the operation, his first sight was through Mac's eyes. Mac was being fed in a cage and Charger experienced it, even the feel of food in his mouth. He was already feeling confused when Jill's view of the world came into focus. She was running down a young trainer and nipping wildly at his legs. Charger staggered out of bed, disoriented by what he was seeing, and flailed around the room. He knocked over several sensitive machines before being held down by half a dozen orderlies while one of them injected a sedative into his thigh.

When he awoke again, he was strapped down and flashing between Mac's viewpoint, Jill's, and his own. It took several days of electronic training before he could figure out which one he was. The experience of seeing the world through another's eyes was wild. He instantly knew things about them that he had no business knowing. He panicked at first, nearly losing his own mind because the Lycan minds were so aggressive, but with much practice and pain, he eventually re-established himself as dominant over them both, though he still got disoriented trying to move in and out of their minds.

Too bad Dal hadn't made it, Charger thought. He would have liked being hooked up with a werewolf.

When he was well enough to fight again, Charger was reassigned to an Australian combat front line group, as one of the new recruits to replace those clobbered by the three Shillelaghs

weeks before. This time it would be different, this time he would save the humans, this time the Shillelaghs would pay for Chang. Being bonded with two Lycans so that the three of them formed one single fighting unit would make them invincible. "The aliens better start running now," he thought.

Because the Lycans were always with him at chow time, Charger was never invited to sit with the humans until he met Ben, an ex-monk who gave up his work when he realized that the church had lied to everyone. He told Charger that being called German, or French, or native, or American, were just social labels, that they were all humans, and all the same. They had the same blood, same flesh, same dreams.

"We are the last of our kind on this planet, and we are heading for extinction," Ben said sadly. "It's like saying I'm Jewish, I'm Christian, I'm Muslim, you know, when the reality is that we're all just religious, and we're still all the same biologically. The aliens are the ones that are different."

Ben was an older man, well built, but not strong. "Come on, mate," Ben said, "bring those pups to chowder, let's eat up tonight, for tomorrow we might have to die."

Charger found it was getting easier to control Mac, a fiery black and rust red short-haired Lyncan, stocky and exceptionally powerful in build, but Jill was still difficult. She had long hair, the muted orange of the stripes on a Bengal tiger, and was incredibly vicious and flexible, though her face was delicate, almost human. She constantly nipped at Mac, who wanted Charger to stop her doing that. It was annoying Charger, too. Or were those Mac's thoughts? Sometimes Charger still clawed at his own mind, trying to figure out whose thoughts he was thinking.

He ate a fine meal with Ben that night. Rations tasted good in Mac's mouth, too. And Jill's. Ben chatted away the evening, waiting for darkness to set in again. Charger told Ben that as the aliens' way of combat seemed to be failing, the smarter ones were forming together, trying to look like the American machines.

He remembered waking one morning as the aliens tried again to dislodge his group from stable high ground. They formed into tank-like objects, massive in size, but they had difficulty navigating the soft, wet soils. One crested a rise and came face to face with an American M-1 tank. The alien version of the M-1 dwarfed the real M-1, which was first to fire. Many rounds poured into the alien machine but did little damage at first. It took the concentrated fire power of several tanks at just the right moment to disable and destroy the fake tank.

The next night saw Charger and Ben sitting beside a small campfire, warming their hands during a lull in the fighting, and hoping the fire wasn't visible to the enemy. Mac and Jill were roaming around in the dark, visiting other Lycans. Charger could 'hear' their thoughts and conversation, but they were just chattering so he ignored them.

Ben was doing all the talking, speculating about the aliens and how the war might have been stopped earlier, preventing many deaths. Charger mostly just listened. He never could see any point talking if he had nothing to say.

"Mankind doesn't have to be evil," Ben said. "The church was created and built by men, and it cannot help being imbued with our sinful nature. But if we simply believe and trust in God, everything becomes simple. There would be no killing."

Charger sensed movement nearby. Stealthy movement. And too close.

"Remember," Ben said, "evil can only thrive when good men do nothing."

Charger swiveled suddenly and thrust his sword into a small alien invader sneaking up behind Ben in the dark.

He turned to face Ben. "I'm bad. But I'm good at math."

Charger was glad to get back into the fight when dawn came. Gunfire erupted as the aliens bore down on the human soldiers behind him and the flashes lit up the morning skyline. Aliens never seemed to fight on any schedule, always at random times. He scrambled to his feet, ready to fight, when the familiar clicking on his wrist computer picked up on three Shillelachs moving rapidly toward his western flank. This time he didn't squat down and wait for the fight but raced full speed down the line toward the three, all the while flashing between Mac's, Jill's, and his own vision.

Jill howled madly and bolted headlong into the Shillelagh, but it was Mac who got there first. He hit the closest Shillelagh so hard that for a moment Charger could feel Mac's breath leave him. The Shillelagh went liquid and seemed to splash everywhere. Jill was already mauling the second Shillelagh when Mac joined in. Charger hit the third Shillelagh hard, slicing deep into its armor. He focused on the gold multiple eyes, trying to find a brain nearby so he could cleave off a chunk.

It was Jill who found the sweet spot, just behind the eyes and down to the left. "Kill there!" is what he heard from her mind. He struck hard at that spot and the third Shillelagh fell dead. Mac and Jill were tormenting the second as it lay dying on the ground.

The first Shillelagh had reformed itself and seemed terrified at what had happened to the other two so quickly. It tried to retreat but ran into an excited Jill. By the time Charger reached it, Mac and Jill were holding it from escaping the way two cats might confine a mouse.

It had been a good morning to wreak revenge for Chang, he thought, proud of what he had done. He was sure the message got back to the aliens' command that this time all hope was lost for them. This morning a new fighter had been born, this day would be the beginning of the downfall of the invaders, as the new weapon entered combat. The Vampire-Lycan hunting had begun and now many Vamps would want the upgrade.

Getting a break before the next battle began, Charger watched the news. The aliens had spread to much of Earth and, when the military command finally got a satellite into orbit, the remaining humans could see that behind enemy lines, the planet was desolate.

Charger shook his head. Sure, the humans had cut into the world for resources, built their homes on land taken from other living beings, but they had been learning. Before the invasion, they had begun giving back to Earth, patching damage done here and there. Humans had felt good about themselves, he thought. But in these satellite photos, Earth was black and barren. There was nothing left behind the alien advance but bare dirt and rocks.

And the new Hyborgs with Lycans? They were nothing like him. They were smaller, with not as much of an edge. Government cut-backs, the newscaster said. Charger laughed bitterly. They were only Vamps and Lycans, they were only meant to be cannon fodder. But they were angry now. The cry for avenging the planet was growing.

Chapter 13 Capturing aliens

Sergeant Hanna Massey began searching the unspoiled green area she'd stumbled into, wondering if her theory that it was an enemy safe haven could be true. She moved carefully from fir trees to cedar trees, sometimes crouching among tall ferns while taking stock. She found no nests of aliens half buried in the soil, no red mass, no sign of any life except for the plants. Flying over from Europe, she'd heard via the radio about the aliens always killing everything when they attacked, even plants and animals. That made no sense. But if true, why hadn't they razed this place down to dirt and rocks? She spent all the remaining daylight hours searching, even to the borders of the green haven, but never finding life. The whole sanctuary, from the ocean inland, was maybe five miles square.

As night fell, Hanna decided to rest among the trees. In the morning she would continue south, looking for a military organization to join. As she set up her bedding gear, she felt the urge to sleep weighing her down. But before she gave in, it would be wise to record the area on her camcorder. Switching it to night vision, Hanna began recording, panning the camera in all directions. As she stared at the small viewing screen, a blur flashed across it. A cold shiver ran the length of her body.

She moved the camera back toward the blur and squinted at the small view screen. There! Something raced past the camera again. Switching to infrared mode, Hanna looked around. With her back pressed firmly against a large Douglas fir, she slowly panned the camera around to her left shoulder. There, not more than three feet from where she sat, four bright orbs hovered a few feet off the ground, at the center of the camcorder screen. Then they blinked. And blinked again.

"Shit!" Hanna screamed as she grabbed her automatic weapon and fired round after round into the thick dark forest in the direction of the blinking eyes.

She grabbed the camcorder again and flashed the lens left, then right, up and down, trying desperately to find those blinking eyes. There was nothing. Whirling around, she looked behind her, half crazed with fear, and fired off more rounds until the magazine was empty. Quickly she reloaded, snatched up her gear and ran hard for the beach. She stopped twice to spray the area with fire and reload, stumbling several times before she reached the beach. There she plunged into the cold ocean water, deeper and deeper. When the weight of the pack on her back forced her head below water, Hanna finally stopped panicking and turned back.

She was alive. But this place was not a safe haven for enemies, it was a trap for stray humans. She had survived only because of the glimmering light she carried; it had to be very important. "And what the hell was that in the bush?" she wondered. "Goddamn invisible aliens." Hanna drew upon all her courage and set out down the beach to find the human military so she could show them the importance of the glimmering light she had.

For six days and nights, she trekked southeast toward the last known American position identified on her map, six days of blackened earth but no corpses. She'd never experienced any fight without seeing the dead littering a battlefield, but these aliens seemed to absorb everything in their brutal assault.

In the heavy dew of the seventh morning, Hanna found herself closing in on the rear of an advancing alien armada. In front of the gigantic moving hulks lay a city already in ruins and the sounds of artillery and gunfire crackled in the distance. Her pace quickened. Her first thought was to join the battle, to contribute all her combat training and determination to defeating the

invaders. But as soon as she started running forward, a jet fighter streaked across the sky and dropped precision guided munitions on one of the large alien objects.

The impact of the missiles sent a shock wave strong enough to wrench the air from Hanna's lungs, sending her sprawling. Thick alien mist mixed with dust swirling up from the ground blinded her but, when the air cleared and the weapons fell silent, Hanna could see that the three huge objects had been brought to a halt. Scattered all around the base of the massive objects darted alien troops fighting a battle with strangely shaped Hyborg super-soldiers. Shaking the dirt from her clothes and pack, Hanna rushed forward into battle, her weapon blazing in the morning light.

She ran straight into an immense knurled alien form that suddenly rose up from the dirt and opened a large gaping mouth that revealed several rows of sharp teeth. Hunching forward and howling, the alien lurched straight at Hanna in a monstrous display of threat. Hanna stared into the multifaceted eyes of the alien and, lunging forward herself, let out a primal yell. For a moment, that stopped the alien in its tracks.

She had guessed these creatures might never have encountered a human woman before and she hoped she looked just as ferocious to them as they did to her. It had worked! Hanna raised her weapon and squeezed the trigger, sending a plague of bullets into the head of the alien, dropping it to the dirt. Hanna smiled. She'd finally gotten a little payback for her fallen comrades. She was determined not to miss any other opportunities.

As the day wore on, the battle favored the defending humans and the fight turned into a slaughter because the aliens would not back down. Small groups of aliens were dug into the dirt on a high patch of ground as the advancing human army, with the Hyborgs, began encircling them just out of weapons range. With only these few aliens remaining, Hanna conceived a brilliant idea. She would try to take prisoners. She just needed to find someone who spoke German so she could translate her idea into English.

Rushing toward the human army, she waved her arms until she attracted some attention. She finally found some German soldiers to speak with and her plan was translated and relayed to command. An hour later, she and her comrades were summoned to the command tent to explain. With the aliens pinned down and not going anywhere, the military had time to discuss Hanna's proposal.

Later that evening, while the aliens holding the high ground were patiently waiting for the humans to advance on their position so they could be cut down like ripe wheat, Hanna and the commanders were discussing the best strategy for capturing some of them alive. They soon discovered that the small blinking light had bonded with Hanna, for when she tried to turn the object over to anyone else, it would stop flashing. She reported on the red mass at the coast, the dying cities and structures, the strange green spaces that were being left for straggling humans to wander into, and most of all, the serious threat of invisible or light-reflecting alien technology.

Scientists had learned that cold was the biggest threat to the aliens, and this understanding was what drove human survivors to demand transportation to the south and north poles of planet Earth. No one in Hanna's command could guess what attempting to freeze the trapped aliens might reveal, so it was decided that several Hyborg vampires and their Lycans, with Hanna and a few scientists, would attempt the impossible.

That night they would approach the aliens, and try to capture them, hoping to discover their physiology and weaknesses. Around midnight the small group quietly set out.



Ivan, leader of the Russian undead reds and ever the opportunist, had discovered the aliens had a weakness. He had surmised that if the aliens avoided the north due to the extreme cold, they might also avoid extreme heat, such as the heat of a flamethrower. Ivan tested the idea by replacing his machine gun with a flamethrower in their first battle on American soil. The aliens, in their encounter suits, were able to resist the flames' heat for only for a short while. Eventually, the flames burned through the suits, quickly cooking the invaders inside. Ivan's compatriots followed his lead and exchanged their weapons for flamethrowers. The undead reds became the front line on American soil. Their thirst for revenge was so great that they were unwilling to let Americans take the lead.

There had been a horrific attack by one of the three gigantic alien siege weapons bearing down on a group of American and German fighters protecting civilians waiting to be transported out of the combat zone. Thad screamed at Ivan and his group to take the right flank as ordered by General Harris. "You're the bait. Go right and draw the alien fire while we swing left and try to get behind them!"

"Typical American cowboy shit," Ivan yelled back at Thad over the screaming of cannon fire. "We will go be your whipping boys! Just make sure you are at the rendezvous point on time!"

Ivan and his small group of undead reds closed in fast on the nearest siege tower, with flamethrowers blasting a stream of liquid fire at the enemy. As soon as the Americans had gained some distance from the Russian fighters, General Harris ordered a focus fire on the alien tower that was Ivan's target.

Thad was stunned to see the band of undead reds caught in the barrage. Huge sections of the alien tower sheared off, crashing down on the Russians, who were trying to take cover in the chaos. Within minutes, the alien tower stopped its advance, and continued crumbling to the ground. The other two towers stepped up their speed toward the small town, trying to close the gap and prevent any more losses.

Charger, fighting the third tower, farthest from the town, managed to stop it momentarily, leaving only the one tower, the size of an office building, bearing down on the defenders.

Thad and his group worked their way to where Ivan's group had been caught in the fight, and found Ivan still alive. Thad said, "Damn, you gave me quite a scare there. I had no idea this was going to happen. I called for medical aid. It should be here shortly."

Ivan lay on his back, blood pouring out of a shoulder wound. "Stupid American cowboy shit! You almost got me killed."

Only Ivan, Natasha, and Mikhail survived out of that group of Russian fighters, and they were flown back to base and patched up. Some of the troops celebrated the stopping of the three towers that day, but all of them now knew that General Harris cared nothing for the soldiers under his command. To him, they were all expendable.

Ivan refused to be stopped in his thirst for revenge. Taking Russia was going to be the biggest mistake these invaders had ever made. As soon as he and the other survivors were repaired, they immediately sought to rejoin the fight, despite what seemed like the attempt by General Harris to kill them all. Ivan had heard that a small group of aliens were dug in on high ground, and a group was being formed to try to capture them.

Ivan demanded that he, Natasha, and Mikhail be given the opportunity to join in the assault on the hill to capture alien enemies. The plan was bold, but the world badly needed answers. Capturing these invaders would allow the scientists the chance to search for weaknesses. This

was a priority now. With the deaths of billions of people all over the world, extreme action was needed. Thus, Ivan's demand was granted. They were to ensure that the aliens on the high ground could find no avenue of retreat.

"Don't worry, this time I will be joining you guys," Thad said to Ivan.

"I feel safer already having an American cowboy at my side," was Ivan's sarcastic reply.

Later, Thad returned. "Hope you all don't mind, but I brought a friend to the party." A huge lumbering creature came forward, with a hunched over, dirty, growling man-beast next to it.

"What the hell is that?" gasped Mikhail, as he stepped back a few paces and clutched his weapon.

"Relax, he's a friend. His name is Charger, and this here is his pet, Mac. Did I get that right?" Thad turned to Charger, looking for confirmation.

Mac growled, and Charger replied, "Not a pet."

Thad also stepped back a bit, putting a little more space between himself and Mac. "Right. Well, command has agreed that we few will assault the hill and try to cut off any retreat by the aliens."

"I guess we got the dirty job, so buckle up, monkeys, this fight might be expensive," Ivan said, with his usual youthful bravado.

Natasha squeezed off a few rounds of flame blasts from her weapon, ensuring the thing was working to peak efficiency. Mac jumped, caught off guard by this action.

"Ah, the big bad putty cat is scared of fire," Natasha teased.

Mac immediately attacked Natasha, sending her flailing to the ground. The Lycan was instantly on top of her, snapping and clawing at her armor. Catching hold of a small section, Mac began peeling the metal flesh from Natasha's body. Screams and shouts arose from everyone.

Everyone except for Charger, that is. He reached down, grabbed Mac by the scruff of his neck and, ripping him free of Natasha, slammed him hard into the dirt. He pinned the thrashing and snapping Mac down with one foot.

"Shit! You bastard! What the fuck was that!" snarled Mikhail as he approached Mac, clicking his flamethrower to life. Charger turned his great mass and attention toward Mikhail and, without words, simply presented himself as a threat. Mikhail responded by stopping and backing up.

"That better not ever happen again!" snapped Mikhail, as he attended to Natasha's wounds.

Ivan turned to Thad. "You damn well better keep those two on a leash, or I will deal with it!"

Thad laughed. "Ain't ya glad they're on our side?"

Ivan was not impressed. Charger just brushed off the insults and released Mac, who went back to his place behind Charger. With things in order, the small group set off into the darkness of night, skirting the base of the hill, just out of the weapons range of the aliens. Once they were behind the hill, Thad radioed to the base that they were ready.

Everyone's attention was focused on the aliens at the top of the hill, waiting for any that tried to retreat. Only Mac realized what was approaching them from behind their position. He whimpered quietly to Charger, who turned to see a ridge of dirt rising up slightly from the ground and slithering toward their position. The others in the group now caught wind of what was happening, and they too turned to face the fast-moving bulk. Up the hill, Hanna's group had started the fight. The aliens were fighting back, and this bulk was apparently rushing to aid the dug-in aliens. It came straight toward Ivan and Thad.

Mac was first to launch himself toward the slithering object, digging at the dirt like a dog. It

was a spinning spike, a weapon everyone dreaded. They would rise up out of the ground and shoot tentacles in every direction, driving their hooked ends through the toughest of armor. Then the spike would spin, drawing back the tentacles, along with whatever was attached, and plunge deep beneath the ground to crush the prey. Not waiting for the tentacles to launch themselves, the three Russians began blasting the rising spike with flamethrowers, singeing Mac's fur. This caught the attention of some of the dug-in aliens; they began attacking downhill, toward Charger and Thad.

"Shit, we're in the middle!" yelled Thad, trying to alert everyone to the danger. His weapon ejected shells all around him as bullets flew wildly.

Like a fast-flowing river, Charger swept uphill through the aliens as they reformed themselves into hard combatants. His great axe, blazing hot with plasma confined in a small magnetic field, sliced easily through the aliens and they fell all around him, squirming and hissing as they died. Mac was ripping apart any tentacle that emanated from the spike, trying to stay clear of Natasha's flames. These spikes were especially feared because, as they began to die, they produced one last weapon. The outer casing of the spike's shell would peel open and launch thousands of small darts tipped with a deadly poison.

"It's going to pop!" Ivan shouted. He and the others began stepping back. They turned around, presenting their armored backs to create a shield wall. Thad ducked into the group for cover.

Mac was the only Lycan ever to find the spike's weakness. He relished pain and would throw himself into the exploding spike, absorbing the darts before they could gain any speed in flight. As the smoke cleared, and the troop turned around to see the results, there on the ground sat Mac, almost drooling with pleasure from the poison darts.

"That's one sick puppy you got there," Natasha said to Charger as he picked a few darts from his armor.

Mac leapt up and rushed at Natasha, snarling. Charger gave Mac a firm look. Mac stopped and backed off. "Not a puppy!" Charger growled as he glared at Natasha and Mikhail.

"Okay, sorry, didn't mean to offend," Natasha said. "One fight tonight was more than enough." She was still smarting from the damage Mac had done to her armor earlier.



Earlier that evening, as the final plans were made, Hanna had been introduced to the group that would accompany her and her blinking magic light. The two scientists carried backpacks with canisters of freezing agents. Five very large vampires and six heavily armored Lycans, with some of the undead reds, would attempt to prevent the aliens from retreating.

Hanna watched as the lead vampire, an enormous man, and his two Lycan companions, relayed to her group the positions to take shortly before they reached the summit of the alien position. Since the female Lycan seemed capable of moving almost silently, she had been given the task of accompanying Hanna and two scientists, with their gear, to the alien nest.

Since Hanna spoke only German, one of the two scientists chosen was bilingual. This helped in the group's communications but would be useless to Hanna and her female Lycan escort when they traveled alone toward the alien nest. It was decided to try a new technology, still not tested fully, of connecting Hanna's mind with the Lycan female, even though the Lycan was already connected to Charger.

The process was brief and relatively painless. A small digital device was connected to the

female Lycan's rear brain stem through the soft tissue at the back of her skull, and the same was done for Hanna. Hanna was told that when the device was activated, the link between the Lycan and her vampire would temporarily be blocked, and that she herself would experience a vague understanding of Lycan thinking, more than enough to communicate at a basic level.

What happened when the device was activated was anything but vague. Hanna was exposed to the female's entire history. She spent five minutes convulsing on a bed, shaking and pitching wildly about, as doctors and scientists tried to calibrate the device for communications. Every event in this poor girl's life was suddenly and violently thrust into Hanna's consciousness and she cried out in sorrow. Tears filled the eyes of this bastion of strength, this woman who had spent her life controlling every emotion she had to be the perfect soldier. The torture the girl had experienced was dumped like a deluge of water on a rock, and Hanna's experience of it wore the rock down to the sand it had once been.

Hanna and Jill began communicating with each other and the two women mentally shared all aspects of their lives. Eventually Jill became stronger, and Hanna traded some strength for compassion. All this happened within the first five minutes of the joining. So, as the evening went on, the two women mentally spoke quietly of many things important to the young girl, Jill, who had missed out on life. A bond was formed, one of understanding and compassion, with Hanna filling Jill's need to bond with an older sister.

As the vampires spread out, occupying strategic positions, Hanna, Jill and the two scientists pressed on up the hill, with the red blinking light to protect them. There was no movement or reaction as they crested the rise and faced a nest of eight aliens. Within minutes, the scientists had sprayed the two aliens nearest them and dragged these frozen and disabled beings away toward the base.

Suddenly and without warning, the remaining six aliens reacted. They came to life and formed hideous weapons of white-hot plasma, slashing toward the small group. Hanna raised the glowing red light to the face of one of the attacking aliens. It stopped and swayed back and forth as if hypnotized.

Jill didn't wait. Her new sister was in trouble and, before the vampires with their Lycans could reach the group, Jill killed five of the aliens. The remaining alien was quickly frozen with the scientists' weapons. The operation had been successful, resulting in three aliens being captured and taken back to command.

In the commotion, Hanna had not realized that Jill was injured and lay bleeding only a few feet from her. When she found Jill, Hanna knelt down and quickly started medical treatment, calling out for assistance in German, which no one understood. The vampires and Lycans just stood there staring. They had been so completely converted to fighters that they no longer knew how to help. Jill was eventually carried back down to the base to be patched up, but not before Hanna had grown a few gray hairs from worry.

By morning, Hanna had been debriefed, the three aliens were being whisked off to a government lab, and Jill had been mended and would survive. Hanna asked if she and Jill could remain linked, but the scientists told her this would not work. Jill and Charger had a permanent link to each other and to Mac. They were, in effect, a single fighting machine and would remain together for life.

Being military, Hanna understood, though she regretted losing Jill. Scheduled to have her link removed, she walked toward the medical tent where Jill lay. Outside the tent stood the huge vampire and his pet Lycan, Mac. Hanna walked calmly up to the Lycan and slammed the butt of her rifle as hard as she could into his head. Mac fell to his knees, dazed and confused, a large

bloody gash open on the side of his face. Hanna placed her boot on his chest, pushing him all the way to the ground, and rammed the barrel of her weapon in his face.

She yelled something in German, then walked into the tent for the procedure. Charger and Mac looked dazed and confused and a passing German doctor translated what Hanna had said. "She said she hopes to be the one who gets to kill you, you bastard, after this is all over."

Mac smiled broadly at the threat, baring shattered and dirty teeth. Taking great pleasure in making a new enemy, he licked the blood from his head like a kid eating ice cream.

Chapter 14 The mad pilot

Ivan had been given the rank of sergeant and was now in command of a small corps of fifty fighters, including the few remaining undead reds of his once powerful home country of Russia. Command, under General Harris, had given this small group an impossible task to complete. They were to fight their way into a newly developed small alien base approximately sixty miles due south of their current position. The task was considered impossible because the last group sent into this small base had disappeared within only five minutes, as had the two groups sent before them. Ivan knew the odds were stacked against them, but he was determined not to fail.

"Gear up, monkeys, we scrub in ten minutes. Got us a transport pilot crazy enough to try and drop us on top of this base," Ivan shouted with youthful gusto. "This time, Natasha, you're going to the entrance gate on the left side with Charger, Mac and Jill. The rest of us are going to the entrance gate on the right. The plan is to bring a full force to bear on the right-side gate, while you four slip around back and get behind the defenders. A small group should be able to go undetected if we put up enough of a fuss to keep the aliens busy."

Ivan was good as a sergeant, thinking out plans clearly and logically. "We'll build a shield wall at the right-side entrance with our gear, which should hold the attention of the aliens. Once you four get behind the defenders, set charges and get out. The blast should turn them around long enough for the rest of us to push inside."

"Really? Do I have to go with Mac again?" whined Natasha. "This is the third time this week I've had to go with that dog. I think he really hates me; he pissed on my pack again last night, and I really stink now."

"Well, stop trying to light his fur on fire and maybe he will stop pissing on your gear," snapped Ivan, for what felt like the hundredth time.

"No, really, I mean smell this." Natasha shoved her pack into Ivan's face. Ivan recoiled at the stench.

"You two need to grow up!"

Mac seemed to be laughing as he stood behind Charger, whose bulky, muscular height dominated the group. Jill sauntered over to Natasha to sniff her pack and also recoiled at the smell.

"See, even the girl dog hates the smell!" Natasha reached over with her disposable lighter to again try igniting Mac's fur.

Ivan threw up his hands and, shaking his head, stormed off.

The scrawny, balding pilot of the transport did sound insane; his mumbling conversation as he stood at the door of the plane worried the fifty fighters as they boarded. "I got this," he chortled. "Look sharp! If I got to, I'll smack this transport into the top of that alien base to get you close. Piece of cake. We got air bags. Most of you should live!" The pilot laughed hysterically, the long flyaway hair growing from the back of his head blowing in the wind, while the fighters eyed him and grumbled among themselves.

As Charger began to board, the pilot babbled, "Hey buddy, you gotta ride in the trailer, you're too big for my transport. I'll get a couple of kennels for your pups, too!" He snickered. Charger just passed him by. The transport creaked under his weight.

"We need some duct tape and another transport. I'll tape them together and get both birds into the air," the pilot sang out. He slapped Jill's ass as she passed. She turned, snarling, the look

on her face saying she was going to kill him, but Charger was quick. He grabbed Jill and tossed her onto the transport.

Mikhail was laughing as he approached the transporter entrance after witnessing the pilot slap Jill's ass. "That was too funny," he said to the pilot.

As he boarded, the pilot slapped Mikhail's ass, too. "Up, up now, princess, we got beers and nuts for everyone on this flight, just sit back and relax. Papa pilot will get you all to your grave lickety-split."

The flight to the small alien base was a nightmare, the plane zigzagging to avoid gunfire. But it gave the American and Russian soldiers time to hurl insults at each other. Mikhail shouted over the drone of the transport's engines, "You Americans, you think you know suffering, but all you really know is Hollywood action hero shit."

A few of the American combat specialists snapped back, unhappy with the Russian's comments, but Mikhail rambled on. It kept his mind off the impending action as the plane staggered on through hostile skies. "We Russians know suffering. You Americans run an obstacle course or two, lose some sleep for a few days, go without supper and coffee, then bitch and moan about the whole ordeal."

The American troops tried to match Mikhail's taunts with insults of their own, but Mikhail's powerful voice drowned them out. "I tell you, Russians know suffering. We lose a million troops fighting the Germans, then a million more fighting our government, and still we press on. Russians suffer as our women die, our children die, and our comrades die and still we fight on! You Americans run home to your mommy when things get bad!" Mikhail laughed loudly.

Everyone was surprised when Mac spoke. "Seems to me, the last time we checked, Russia was a wasteland of the dead and dying. Looks like the only thing the Russians know how to do well is suffer!"

Mikhail stopped laughing and his face went cold and hard. Natasha, realizing the threat Mac presented, reached out and gripped Mikhail's arm tight, stopping the conversation dead. Charger glared at Mac. On occasion, Mac could not resist saying what was on his mind. The outcome was never favorable.

The pilot continued bobbing and weaving through the skies, dodging alien gunfire from below. The transport was hit repeatedly by projectiles yet flew straight on. Suddenly it dove and a minute later slammed across the ground right to the alien base. The pilot had already left the cockpit before the transport hit the base perimeter and headed for the exit doors, shouting, "Come on, everyone, follow me. I say we crap on these bastards today!"

Jill stuck one foot into the aisle and tripped the lunatic pilot as he ran past, sending him tumbling to the floor of the transport. The soldiers quickly jumped out and set up a defensive line, with twenty of them turning their backs on the aliens to create a shield wall. The remainder began engaging the enemy with heavy weapons. The crazy pilot had regained his footing and was running wildly in front of the shield wall, back and forth, like a plastic duck in a carnival shooting game, taunting the aliens.

In the confusion, Charger, Mac, Jill, and Natasha slipped out of the enemy's field of vision and entered the base. They did as they had planned, setting explosives, getting out, then detonating them. As the aliens rushed to fight what they thought was behind them, the troops under Ivan's command pushed into the base in force.

"We're in! Push, you monkeys! Let's get this done!" shouted Ivan. The aliens were scattering and retreating. Ivan was jubilant; achieving the goal should be a snap. Away from their huge war machines, the aliens hardly looked like a threat at all. They were short and slight, not

more than five feet tall. But they moved so fast, they almost blurred.

In the confusion, the transport pilot had slipped through the ranks and was leading the charge, screaming, "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go, with a bang bang here, and a bang bang there, you die, you die!"

"Somebody stop that lunatic before he gets us all killed!" shouted Mikhail.

Mac launched himself forward with blazing speed, clearing the heads of the soldiers in one great leap. He landed on the pilot, driving him face first into the dirt and splitting his lip. Blood gushed forth. The soldiers were stunned with Mac's power and strength.

The pilot squirmed under Mac's paws and turned himself over. His face was cut up badly and bleeding. He shouted, "Down, Fido, down, stop humping my leg! Bad dog! Bad!"

Mac simply punched him in the head, knocking him out cold. The soldiers stormed past the two and pressed hard on the retreating aliens. The aliens were withdrawing downward, into their main structure, which was set almost underground. Ivan was in time to see them rushing into a room at the end of a hallway where they would be able to command a strong defensive position.

"We got them pinned down in there. Any ideas?" Thad asked Ivan.

"Nope, I'm fresh out. Anyone?" Ivan replied.

"Jill says she can get close," Charger growled. No one had heard Jill say a word.

Ivan replied. "I don't think anyone can safely get down that hallway; it's set up like a kill zone."

Charger just looked at Ivan and snorted. Jill started moving, seeming to defy gravity. With an explosive in her mouth, her long nails began digging into the reddish walls and ceiling of the alien base, and she crawled flat along the ceiling upside down. Her stealthy movements made the bizarre event seem almost dreamlike. Her soft orangey fur blended in with the reddish color of the walls and ceiling. Without the aliens even noticing, Jill planted the explosive on the door at the end of the hall and crept back, unscathed.

"Wow, I mean just wow!" spouted the pilot, who had returned to consciousness and made his way to the group. "Can I date your daughter?" he asked Charger.

Mac growled at the pilot.

"Oh, you can come, too, pup," the pilot said to Mac. "I think she's too damn sexy for me alone anyways."

Jill turned away, seemingly embarrassed. Ivan thought that if somebody peeled all that fur off her, they'd be able to see her blushing.

There was a great explosion and the group rushed into the room at the end of the hall. They killed the remaining alien defenders, except for a lone alien hiding in one of the back rooms. It was not a defender, since it was unarmed, but it seemed important. "I say we tie this one and our pilot friend together and pack them out of here fast. We don't know if this thing called for reinforcements," Thad said.

"I got duct tape," the pilot offered.

The group moved quickly, retracing their steps back to the right-hand gate. But there, they emerged into a barrage of alien weapon fire that nearly wiped them all out. Natasha and Mikhail fell, then Ivan, as he tried to reach his friends. The pilot grabbed Jill by the arm and whispered, "This way, honey, tell your friends to follow us. I got this."

Thad and Mac, with Charger carrying the captive alien, began moving downhill, away from the defenders. At the bottom of the hill was a small transport craft.

The pilot said. "See, I jettisoned the survival pod just before impact. We can use it to get the hell out of here." The small band entered the craft with regret, knowing that all was lost for the

humans left behind. They lifted into the sky and returned to the command base.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Yes, Reader, General Harris was pleased with Thad and the returnees, and of course he never gave a thought to all the soldiers who were killed. He promoted Thad, ignoring entirely what the Hyborgs had contributed.

Did they get the alien back to headquarters? Oh, yes, and the general intended to subject it to prolonged torture. He wanted information, naturally, but he enjoyed causing pain during the process. So, he was angry and disgusted when he discovered that the alien had died en route to headquarters.

"Dump it in a freezer," he said to his aides. "Tell the lab guys about it if they turn up. Maybe they'll figure out what makes these suckers tick."

Despite his annoyance, the general gave the pilot a medal for bravery in the face of hostile opposition, which the pilot promptly tried to trade to Jill for sexual favors.

Did she go for it? Well, certainly not then. Mac had reached his breaking point and, before the group of officers, lashed out and broke the pilot's jaw. Mac was sentenced to two months in solitary lockup.

Yes, I think Mac was jealous, though I never did find out whether he regarded her as his daughter or his mate.

I had to give Jill credit, though. She felt sorry for the pilot. He was definitely odd, but so was she. When she had down time, Jill would sneak off to visit him in the hospital.

Did Charger know what was happening? Of course, but he blocked the thoughts out of his mind to prevent Mac from learning.

Chapter 15 An unexpected army

That's what they were – an unexpected army. No one would ever have imagined such a crazy move. Maybe that's why it worked. Maybe it was just enough to tip the balance, since by this time German and American soldiers had blended into disciplined fighting units, and the aliens seemed stalled along most of their front lines.

Back at headquarters, the generals had other things on their minds.

"Okay, Fritz, you got my attention. What's so important it can't wait till I've had a coffee?" General Harris demanded. It was morning and the German general, who had been the first to notice the strategy the aliens were using, hovered, impatiently trying to speak with his American counterpart.

"You Americans and your sense of humor!" Dieter said. "That is possibly why we Germans were kicking your troops around so badly at the beginning of the second world war." He paused. "I have come all the way from my home to help save your asses, and still you can't get my name right! It's Dieter, General Dieter A'Ochay, and I expect you should remember it."

Scowling darkly, small veins throbbing in his neck, General Harris said, "Shit, Fritz, whatever! Just get to the goddamn point. I need a coffee." He was not a man to trifle with before breakfast.

"I need you to get a message to my wife. She can help with broadcasting to these separated forces of yours, both our intentions and the tactics we'll need to use," General A'Ochay said. "If the armies have this information, we might finally be able to seal the pockets of alien resistance that are killing so many of our forces. And we must let the world know that we intend to use nuclear weapons to try to contain the aliens."

The invasion had begun with the loss of most satellites in orbit around the planet, which made communication difficult. Now that every satellite was under alien control, getting information out to all parts of the country was almost impossible. But not quite. Old methods of broadcasting were still available, and it was General A'Ochay's wife, Pam, now in full control of the media, who was reporting daily to the citizens of America on what was happening around the country.

"Fine, fine, just get it done," General Harris said, with a sneer. "Corporal!" he snapped, "Get Fritz here a radio and a line to his wife, and get me a goddamn coffee!"

Some twenty miles to the south, Thad and his sidekick, Pete, were now moving with a German light infantry group. The small party was huddled tightly around one of the American M-1 tanks, moving slowly down the narrow streets of a small east coast town. They were trying to get to a better-fortified position before the aliens' next surge. They had rounded a street corner that crested a small hill when, to their surprise, they found themselves face to face with an alien interpretation of a tank.

It had become clear by now that the invaders, though they had eyes, clearly did not see things as humans did. There were reports of aliens trying to infiltrate military positions by casting themselves as human in appearance. To the human soldiers, these impostors were easily spotted. The human-form aliens were merely a dark shadow outline of a human all hunched over, like something out of a horror show. Nevertheless, this alien version of a tank was massive. It shimmered in the morning sun and moved much like the aliens themselves. It appeared to dart from side to side as solid parts seemed to pass through liquid parts while it advanced.

The alien tank fired a solid projectile, which struck the M-1, slicing a large gash down one side and tearing off part of the track. As the invaders' original tactics had begun to fail, they seemed to be adopting a more human method of fighting. Human-form aliens appeared now on the front lines of battle and, instead of being themselves the weapons, they sent spike-like projectiles like bullets from their forms into the human armies. The small band of soldiers around the tank fought well, but more and more humans were falling to this new alien tactic.

As Pete collapsed to the ground beside him, sliced in two, Thad yelled, "Fall back, fall back, damn it!"

An eerie, haunting scream almost drowned out the noise of battle.

The scream shook Thad to his boots. He looked up and rubbed the dirt from his eyes. Was he actually seeing what he thought he saw?

Appearing from behind the aliens and slicing into them were Indians.

Indians in jeans, with leather vests, feathers in their hair and war paint on their faces. This unexpected army had arrived like the cavalry always did in movies. Native Americans, wielding historic weapons that signaled to everyone a new way of creating fear and panic in the aliens. They swarmed over the enemy, slicing into them, scattering bodies left and right.

Hope had been fading for Thad's group before that moment, but this army of people had shown up, as if from the ashes of their ancestors, howling like demons, and turned the tide of battle back into human hands.

When things calmed down, Thad said, "Damn, it's good to see you guys. I was beginning to wonder if I had to fight this thing alone."

Danny Opinhimmer said, "We need to capture an alien, try to learn its weaknesses. I have a plan on how to do that, but I could do with some help."

"Capture one? Have you got stuff to freeze them with?" Thad asked. "I helped capture three of the things and that's what we used."

"Okay, follow me on this for a second," Danny's voice rang out. "If we get some liquid nitrogen, we can freeze one long enough to capture it. We can then go find some scientist guy to help figure these things out."

"Wow, that almost seems logical." Thad smirked. "I guess you didn't hear what I said." Maybe the Indian wanted a commendation or something. "Already been done."

"Never mind, bitch, we will do it ourselves," Danny said. Turning, he called to his troops to advance and, to Thad's surprise, thousands of Native Americans in all manner of clothing and weapons began advancing through the city in search of the right alien for Danny's idea.

Danny was determined, and maybe just a little lucky. His native tradition spoke of a great serpent god that descended from the stars and ruled his people cruelly for many years until one day a young brave found the secret of the god and defeated it. Danny was set on finding the secret of these alien invaders. But first he needed to catch one. That guy, Thad, was likely full of shit with his talk of capturing aliens.

"Okay, wait, I'm sorry," Thad called as he chased after Danny. "You helped me, now let me help you."

Danny nodded and the group moved off in search of an alien. The mass of humans moved through the streets, in and out of buildings, looking everywhere, when suddenly the call came back to Danny. They had found one!

What they caught even surprised Thad. One of the human-form alien spies had managed to get itself locked into a delicatessen meat locker. The cold air was slowing the alien's movement considerably and Danny was overjoyed.

"I have an uncle, a professor at the university close to the town where I grew up. He told me of a theory he developed regarding aliens," Danny told Thad as they observed the chaotic and confusing movements of the trapped alien.

"He said they would probably be like maggots. They would be birthed from a single form, all identical. They'd be able to fit together to form whatever object they conceive," Danny continued. "Maybe that's how these aliens got here. They came as one being, and then split into multiple beings. My uncle believed they would be connected in thought somehow."

"What, like psychic alien cloning monsters?" Thad asked, revealing his usual combination of too little knowledge and too much brash stupidity.

Danny sneered. "Yeah, right. That's it exactly, or for the grown-ups in the room, they'd be more like living Lego, able to form complex shapes that operate from a single brain with a common purpose."

Thad was not pleased with this response. "So, what's your plan, smart ass?" Thad said. "We got an alien, but do you know any scientists that can figure this thing out fast? Last I heard from command, we have like a hundred giant maggot monsters heading our way!"

Danny gave instructions to his men, and they found a heavy steel crate, filled it with bags of ice and managed to trap the sluggish alien inside the crate and load it into the back of a waiting truck.

"Let's get it to your command structure and see if someone there can help," Danny said aloud, not speaking to anyone directly.

Thad, Danny, and half a dozen others loaded the crate into a truck and drove north to the command post. Thad led the group to the building that housed the generals and after a lot of explaining and arguing with the gatekeepers, the generals finally relented and took an interest in what Danny was saying. When they realized the alien was alive and in a metal box practically on their doorstep, things started moving. Commands were shouted and a few scientists were summoned to the building.

Scientists from varied backgrounds arrived and were seated in one of the larger rooms along with the generals. Danny, with his native compatriots, wheeled the alien in its box to the front of the room. Danny started explaining what he had learned from his uncle.

"So, you're saying your uncle thinks they are symbiotic in nature, a single organism with a conjoined intelligence?" Dr. Pablo asked. Dr. Pablo was a physicist from Caltech, learned and careful in speech. Every word, and he used many, seemed to be planned and formed precisely, causing his speech to be somewhat slow.

"That's right, and he also believed that if we could catch one, we might be able to find out what radio frequency they use to communicate," Danny replied.

"And how did your uncle manage to come up with this theory?" Dr. Pablo inquired.

"He worked at Area 51 before he went to work at the university," was Danny's response.

The silence was deafening, and then the giggling and snickering started.

"They only sent him to the university after his breakdown, but he has several degrees and he always said the alien ship he was working on was the reason he got ill," Danny continued.

Outright laughter and anger filled the room.

"You must be mad!" Dr. Pablo said, losing his well-crafted composure. "Area 51 itself was madness. What was your uncle's name?"

"Dr. Harold Opinhimmer," Danny said flatly.

The room went silent. The scientists knew the name. This man's work was published in many learned journals, and he had once been considered one of the most intelligent men on the

planet, possibly in history.

But one still had doubts and demanded, "How is he your uncle? He is not a native American."

"Well, call him my half-uncle then," Danny said, glaring at the questioner. "His half-brother was my father, who was half native. He married a full-blood native, my mother. You get all that?"

"And how did your uncle conclude that the aliens use radio frequency to communicate with each other?" another of the attending scientists inquired.

"I'm not sure," replied Danny. "I only know what he told me. When we find him, I'm sure he can explain how he learned this. He was working on a dig in Turkey when the invasion started, and I don't know whether he survived or even where he is."

"I'm sorry," said one of the generals, who had just returned from some sort of interruption at the door, "but we have just learned that your uncle is dead." The general spoke to an aide. "Get the man who calls himself Ben and bring him here."

Danny's heart was aching, but he looked at Ben walking into the room, and sensed that this man was kind. "How did you know my uncle?"

"We were on a plane from Turkey, hoping to land in Seattle, when the aliens attacked," Ben said. "We found shelter and fought, but one of the aliens mortally wounded your uncle. Before he died, he said that the key was radio frequency 823.43. I've been hoping to get that information to the top authorities ever since." Ben looked around at all the brass. "Looks like I might finally have found the right place."

"Did my uncle say anything else?" Danny asked.

"Sorry, mate, but he didn't," Ben said. "He was a good man, your uncle."

That was the end of the conversation. Another officer rushed into the room and after a few words with the commander in charge, everyone's attention focused on what the commanding officer announced. "We damn well better figure this out fast. I have just received word that the large objects heading our way, the objects that we have been tracking for the last few days are now within visual range, and you won't like what we are facing."

The group in the room broke up into their constituent parts, the scientists disappearing into the bunkers to work and the officers heading to the main command post to assess the next strategic move. Danny and Ben were swept along with the scientists.

General Harris bit down hard on his cigar and glared into the computer monitor that now showed three large objects which moved seemingly at a snail's pace toward their position.

"Where's my goddamn coffee!" he snapped. "Can't you idiots focus the screen better? I can barely make out the shape of these things!"

The young officer hard at work operating the computer replied, "That is already in focus sir. They seem to vibrate as a form of camouflage, and it makes getting a bead on the objects that much harder to achieve."

"Goddamn wiggling alien bastards!" Harris snapped "Try harder, damn it. I can't fight what I can't see!"

What they could see, however, were three large siege weapons roughly the size of an office building, moving at a walking pace, shrouded in mist. Each object consisted of large insect-like pincers, attached to a long neck that swung about, grabbing and tearing any large objects in its path. Beneath the large pincers and closer to the body of the alien were multiple claws of varying lengths moving about on thick arms, possibly eight or ten in total. Each gigantic body moved forward on five massive legs that resembled heavy concrete pillars splayed at the ground level

like tree roots, all covered in thick black armor that jutted out from the body in spikes and plates. As a siege weapon got within range of a combat group, alien troops would drop off the main body like spiders descending from webs. They were decimating the troops, who were now in full retreat.

"Where the hell are my undead?" Harris yelled.

"The 7th and 13th half-breeds are attacking the left flank now, sir, with the 25th platoon of high-bred vamps holding the center," replied a captain.

"I want all retreating and standing combat groups, including artillery and lasers, to focus fire on the left flank alien. Bring that goddamn thing down!" General Harris roared.

"But sir," the captain replied, "that will destroy the 7th and 13th."

General Harris exploded. "I don't give a rat's ass about the undead. They are already dead. Open fire!"

Later, many people asked whether this order was a crime against humanity. Killing one's own troops in a battle was an act of treason. Did any soldier, whether human, half-dead or hybrid, have any rights at all? General Harris's willingness to sacrifice soldiers in battle happened all too often and would eventually result in making enemies of those soldiers he considered disposable combatants. But Harris focused only on his obsession to win, on the results. During that moment, as he looked on, hundreds of soldiers perished.

Gathering in a room deep below ground, the scientists, with Danny and Ben, were trying to understand the physical nature of the captured alien. The alien fought wildly against its restraints. A few brave medical scientists approached the thing and cut a section of the skin to have it examined for DNA. They hoped this might tell them what weaknesses it had in biological warfare. The answers came back as inconclusive and for some time the group was stumped as to how to proceed.

A young woman in the room noticed a small seam line around the alien's body, and it was soon discovered that the alien was housed in a synthetic body suit. The scientists went to work dissecting the suit to get at the occupant. What they found inside the suit made Danny's skin crawl. The stench it produced was almost unbearable and a small figure with dark slanted eyes and blackened skin, with a hideously deformed face, glared out at the amazed group. The gold-colored multifaceted eyes, noticed by so many, turned out not to be eyes but what the scientists assumed were protective goggles.

It was measured as being a little under five feet in height, and possibly a hundred pounds. The skin was rough and oily, and lacked hair. It fought savagely, trying to attack the scientists, causing many to jump back. As it broke free, an intense, blinding light filled the room and a piercing screeching ensued. The small humanoid leapt toward the young female scientist just as General Harris entered the room. He quickly drew his weapon and fired. The bullet tore off the woman's ear but killed the alien.

"Nasty little pricks," Harris spat. After a long pause, he said, "Well, gut it, and let's see how it works!"

Chapter 16 The mother ship

When General Harris stopped to look out the window of the command building, all he could see was utter destruction. Soldiers lay scattered about like children's misplaced toys, broken and dying. Medics scurried among them. "This ends tomorrow," Harris said, and drew hard on a half-finished cigar. His plan had been conceived over quite some time and, with the intelligence the military had managed to gather from many battles with the invaders, he was certain of its success.

"Even if this plan fails, it will still get rid of that Nazi thorn in my side, General A'Ochay. Sometimes I'm not sure who to cheer for here, the aliens or our guys, goddamn Nazi bastard." The general went back to pacing around the room.

With the backing of what remained of the American leadership, and the discoveries made from the four captured alien specimens, coupled with the strange red blinking light Hanna carried, Harris was certain he had a plan worth trying. "Besides, what the hell do we have to lose? We've been handed our asses in so many battles that, if nothing else, these damn aliens will learn not to fuck with us. Can't wait till this is all over and they honor me with a statue. Better damn well be bigger than what Crazy Horse got."

A knock on the door halted General Harris's conversation with himself. His secretary entered and said a car was waiting to take him to the project site. Grabbing his hat and coat, General Harris went downstairs and was whisked off for his two o'clock meeting.

For four months, scientists had worked day and night to understand the mechanics of the captured alien as well as his synthetic encounter suit, looking for a weakness that could be exploited in Earth's favor. What they discovered shocked and appalled them, but General Harris was jubilant.

Many of the scientists thought the creature was an aberration, or a freak of nature, until examination of the three other aliens brought to them by Sergeant Hanna Massey proved that the so-called alien invaders had originally come from Earth. The knowledge that these invaders were human, though they had obviously left Earth sometime in the distant past, caused some optimists to think it might be possible to communicate with the invaders and end the destruction.

Everything was tried, without success. The invaders kept fighting and the destruction kept mounting, giving General Harris all the power he needed to attempt to win the battle for Earth on his own twisted terms. Seven billion people worldwide had been reduced to a mere fraction of that number after three years of fighting, which meant that General Harris was now firmly in control of the remaining armies.

His plan was simple, straight out of Hollywood. Remove the encounter suits from the captured aliens and put soldiers in them. Send the soldiers to the mother ship, now that they had learned the radio frequency the aliens used and triangulated their position in space. Load their pockets with nuclear bombs and presto, lots of dead aliens and the mother ship destroyed. That meant no more supplies for the ones on the ground.

As crazy as all that sounded, Earth was desperate, and the remaining government impotent. So, it was agreed that Harris's plan had to be tried, and science, the strong, steady backbone of humanity, was again employed in doing the army's dirty work to end yet another pointless war. Some people thought that science may have been to blame for the whole thing getting started. Throughout the vast number of holy and political wars started by humans, it was science, in an

attempt to make life better, that had invented television. And it was television which had broadcast Earth's position in the universe, as useful to potential enemies as painting a giant target on one of the continents.

As science began to realize its role in the possible destruction of all life, digital technology was developed in hopes of quieting down Earth's position in space. But it seemed the damage had already been done. So now it fell to science to find a way to encase humans in the biological suits and to play a part in the destruction of the masses of bloodthirsty life on the doorstep. The hands of science would be forever stained with blood but, resigned to their fate, they found a way.

From the day that Danny and Thad captured the alien and brought it kicking and screaming to the military, they found themselves drafted to alien research duty. No matter where the alien was trucked for scientists to examine, Danny and Thad were never far behind. So, when the day came that General Harris got his wish, Danny and Thad were the two obvious choices to go into space to do Harris's dirty work. Sergeant Hanna was chosen because the red blinking light that allowed them to gain access to the aliens had bonded with her and would never operate for anyone else. That only left the fourth alien suit, and as General Harris hated General Dieter A'Ochay, the choice was an easy one.

There was only one real problem. "Well, do we or do we not have a way to get this team into orbit and onto that damn mother ship?" screamed a half-crazed General Harris at the project leaders. His weekly visits to the project personnel always ended as scream fests on his part, rather than resolutions to problems. "I have a goddamn world that needs saving and you idiots are dicking around and eating bonbons!"

"We think that the Russian and Chinese parts we have can be adapted to work on our rockets, but we need more time," pleaded one of the project leaders.

"Sure! How much more time do you think you need? I'm willing to let a few more million humans die so you assholes can have more time," yelled a red-faced Harris. "Don't try to tell me you jerkwads don't have enough personnel to get the task done! Take your goddamn dicks out of each other's assholes and stop fucking around! You have two more days, and that's it. Then I will start drafting you bastards to go fight at the front lines." General Harris slammed his fist down hard on the table and everyone jumped. He turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him, and everyone jumped again.

Two days later, three botched but functioning rockets sat on the launch pads at Cape Lincoln, Nebraska. So many of the states were now desolate and barren because of the alien attacks that Lincoln was the only safe place left for rocket pads. Each rocket was capable of carrying five geared soldiers into orbit, which meant that fifteen good soldiers would attack the mother ship, hoping to save Earth. But General Harris suspected that the aliens in orbit could easily see the rockets and guess what he had planned. So, off to the side of the launch pads was a discreet, dull building that housed the real assault team.

The space plane developed by NASA for reconnaissance in high orbit had been retrofitted to hold four soldiers. Hanna, Danny, Thad, and Dieter were stitched into the alien encounter suits, which had enough elasticity that they could be stretched to cover the larger humans. Then they were fitted with small oxygen recycling packs and loaded into the craft at night. The other fifteen soldiers were to fight their way as far as possible onto the mother craft, buying time for, and eventually dying for, the four principal fighters. Those four, flying in the space plane, were to sneak aboard and plant high-yield nuclear explosives at key locations. Each of the four encounter suits was fitted with thruster packs and one weapon of mass destruction.

When the four principal fighters reached high orbit, escaping Earth's gravitational pull, they would leave the space plane and, with the thruster packs, board the mother craft through openings discovered by Earth-based observers. At least, that was the plan.

Once everybody was in place, General Harris gave the command to launch and, simultaneously, three Titan rockets bolted into orbit straight for a rendezvous with the alien mother ship. The blasts gave cover for the space plane to slip into the air and to plot its own course with destiny.

The thunderous onslaught of the three rockets hurtling toward the mother ship caught the attention of the aliens, who swiftly prepared to repel these soldiers with deadly ferocity. A blistering crossfire of plasma projectiles hurtled through space as Earth ships, guided by ground-based crews, fought to distract the aliens, avoid destruction, and give the soldiers a fighting chance.

Meanwhile, the four humans in the alien encounter suits got within range of the mother ship, avoiding the attention of the aliens, and quietly slipped out into dark space. Linked together with tethers, the four silently worked their way toward the mother ship. Once the space plane had been vacated, cunning old General Harris played the last card up his sleeve.

He sat at a control console the project team had designed to his specifications and, with a drink in the holder at the side of his large leather chair, he donned leather gloves and took control of the space plane with a joystick. The front nose cone of the space plane split apart and was ejected into space, revealing four front-facing Gatling guns. Large shark-like teeth were painted on the sides of the plane.

Realigning the space plane to face the alien ship head on, a filthy flood of invective exploded from General Harris's mouth as he squeezed the trigger and blasted the sides of the ship with bullets. Like a flea attacking a bull elephant, General Harris took great joy in behaving like a small kid with a new toy. But when the bullets had been exhausted, the half-mad general had one more ploy. He set a course straight at the mother ship and, as the space plane hit, he detonated an onboard nuclear weapon of awesome power. For a moment, this did catch the attention of the aliens. But, like a fly hitting the window of a speeding car, it was soon dismissed.

Sadly, only one of the three rockets managed to penetrate the hull of the mother ship. Those five soldiers fought valiantly but briefly.

Meanwhile, Dieter discovered a problem. From Earth, what looked like holes in the mother ship were not actually holes. With time growing short, the four humans were desperate to gain access. They crawled or drifted down the gigantic hull of the craft, searching in vain for an entrance. They had managed to get this far, and they were determined not to fail now.

"Here!" Thad snapped. "I got it! Here's a way in!" The four regrouped and entered the craft, finding their way, after much time, to the inner workings of the beast. They slinked along the corridors as passing aliens appeared not to notice them. Hanna's blinking red light was working. At least for now.

They found their way to where the scientists had told them to place their ordinance for maximum results. "You know this is all just guesswork," Danny whispered. "Those eggheads back on Earth have no idea where we should be placing these things." He pointed to the bomb strapped to his side.

"You may be right, but let's give them the benefit of the doubt," replied Dieter.

Hanna piped up over the intercom in German. Danny looked at Thad, then they both looked at Dieter. "What did she say?" asked Thad.

"She said, less talk, more killing," replied Dieter, with a smile.

Their tasks done, they made their way back toward the opening where they had gained access. However, just short of escape, one of the passing aliens bumped into Thad. He was some distance behind the group, and it appeared that the red blinking light didn't keep humans safe unless they were close to it. The alien grew hostile and poked at him with an out-stretched arm.

"Fuck this!" Thad snarled as he removed a long dagger from the holster on his leg and thrust it hard into the front of the alien. There were screams, then a fight, and alarms rang out everywhere. Danny grabbed Dieter and Hanna and forced them to leave Thad, who was now being attacked from all directions by enraged aliens.

Struggling to move faster, the three worked their way to the exit and, out in the void of space, they ignited the thruster packs and rocketed away from the surface of the mother ship. As they did so, Dieter pressed a button on his wrist, sending the signal back to Earth to detonate the weapons. In the darkness of space, and unable to hear any sound on their headsets but breathing, the three saw the ship begin breaking apart. There was no dramatic light show, no thunderous explosion to lend effect, just the sight of the enormous space-borne vessel crumbling into pieces.

There was, however, an impact. But, instead of blasting them in the chest like a shockwave on Earth, they found themselves being sucked in the direction of the destructing ship. The trio fought desperately to thrust themselves away from the mother ship and, after what felt like an eternity, they succeeded.

"Well, let's hope Harris will do as he said, and get that shuttle up to us ASAP," gasped Danny, out of breath from the struggle to escape.

Hanna again spoke and Dieter willingly translated for Danny. "She said he will, for she threatened to fall back to Earth and land on him if he didn't."

The three drifted for some time before their helmets' heads-up displays detected a ship heading toward them.

But it was not an Earth craft. The small alien ship came nearer and nearer, seemingly out of control and drifting. The three decided this was an opportunity to capture an alien space pod. Danny reached out and simply grabbed hold of the craft and all three, as they were tethered together, were pulled onto its trajectory.

Hanna spoke and Dieter translated. "She said you caught it, so you get to go in first."

The three snooped around the surface of the small craft for some time before Danny managed to find what he thought might be a way inside. With a bit of jimmying, they gained access to the small, cramped escape pod. Inside lay an injured alien, very different from any they'd seen before, with many insignias pinned to what might have been a uniform. "Think we caught the alien boss?" Dieter asked Danny.

"Shit, maybe," came his reply.

Hanna could not contain her desire to cause trouble. In broken English, she shook the alien, backhanded it hard, and said, "You da boss?"

Danny laughed, and Dieter joined in. Hanna looked so ridiculous slapping the alien. The alien surged to life and hit Hanna hard enough to knock her across the ship, where she collapsed, unconscious. Then it stunned Dieter with some type of shock weapon, and he blacked out, too.

The alien rose from its chair, a hideous dark mass, staggering, but seeming to spread out in all directions in the small space. Its gold-colored multi-faceted eyes focused on Danny, who'd been tossed about in the melee because he was still tethered to the other two. The alien shuddered, then staggered toward Danny, creating from a front appendage a blazing hot phosphorescent plasma weapon like an axe, dripping glowing hot liquid metal on the floor.

"Shit!" snarled Danny as he struggled to unclip himself from the tether. The alien seemed

disorientated and swung wildly at Danny, who shifted enough to dodge the attack. The small, confined space of the ship made it all but impossible to avoid getting hit, but Danny managed it. The alien struck hard but haphazardly into bulkheads and consoles, sending sparks flying everywhere, temporarily blinding itself long enough for Danny to slip behind the beast. Danny had no weapons now but his own ingenuity.

Danny placed his back against the ship's wall and, with both feet, kicked the alien hard in the back, sending it into the opposing wall. It crashed, stumbled, and slumped down just long enough for Danny to jump forward. He wrapped one arm hard around its neck and, with the other arm, grabbed the weapon. With all his strength, he pulled the weapon slowly toward the floundering alien, and began cutting into its black heavy body suit, working his way inward toward the flesh.

The thrashing slowed as the alien began losing the fight. The two opponents lay motionless on the floor, Danny breathing heavily, when the alien's head split open, revealing a human-like face beneath. What appeared to be a helmet, with goggles which looked like multi-faceted gold eyes, fell away, and the true occupant revealed itself. Its mouth, though disfigured, began moving!

One word... "Why?"

It sounded like a hiss, but Danny was sure it said, "Why?" Shocked, he sat upright, throwing the alien away from him as if it were a rotting corpse. He shivered at the thought, and instinctively tried to brush the touch of the alien's body off his arms. After a moment, he composed himself and bent down to the almost human face of the invader, and asked, "Did you just ask why?"

Nothing happened. Danny shook the body of his opponent and yelled, "Did you just fucking ask WHY? *You invaded us!*"

There was no reply. It was dead. Danny slumped back to the floor, exhausted.

Beeping began, quietly at first, then Danny realized the sound came from his helmet. His heads-up display was signaling another approaching ship, the shuttle craft the air force used. Danny swore as he realized that he and his crew were inside an alien craft. The air force was now approaching, probably with guns aimed.

Struggling to his feet, Danny looked about desperately, trying to think of some way to signal the air force to keep them from blowing his pod to bits. On the floor, poking out of one of the bomb packs they had carried to the mother ship, was a flag. Thad, in his American cowboy wisdom, had thought it smart to bring an American flag to the ship they planned to destroy. As he had put it, "Plant the motherfucker up those bastards' asses!"

Fighting his way out of the craft and into the blackness of space, Danny threw himself off the craft in the direction of the approaching shuttle, frantically trying to wave the American flag so that the air force would not attack.

Through his headphones came a voice, "Okay, okay. We can detect your suit's homing beacon and we know it's you, but the American flag is a nice touch." The air force pilot continued, "I think you might be a little low on oxygen, so climb aboard."

Danny had already succumbed to oxygen deprivation and had passed out as he hit the window of the shuttle, though fortunately not very hard. The pilots laughed as they pulled him onboard to safety.

Chapter 17 Celebrating the heroes

Pam pinned the small microphone to her red silk blouse, wishing she could have something new to wear. But these days, people made do with what they had. Food was still hard to get and everything else was nearly impossible. The small, over-worked staff of the television studio was making sure that Danny, Hanna, and Pam's husband, Dieter, were seated so that the cameras could capture a good view.

The people of Earth hungered for heroes after the brutal battering they had suffered during the war, and this would be the first live televised interview with their greatest warriors. The long-awaited broadcast from the city center had thousands of fans lining the streets just to catch a glimpse, on makeshift monitors, of the three soldiers being celebrated. Pam was grateful to see Dean hovering in the background, ready to run errands for her on this very special day.

The destruction of the alien mother ship in orbit had meant that salvation for humanity was finally possible. Because the aliens could no longer re-supply their ground forces, it had taken only a few months for Earth's military to achieve the final defeat of the invaders. Rather than push the aliens into pockets to control them, General Harris had decided it was easier just to bomb them, then send in the infantry to mop up the remainder. Not only was it easier but, whether they admitted it or not, most people thirsted for revenge.

When the last of the aliens had been hunted down and killed, those human survivors sent to the far reaches of the north and south began returning to their homes and were grateful, for a while, just to be warm. People walked city streets again and slowly they began the massive cleanup.

The cameras started rolling and Pam introduced the three guests. Turning to Dieter, she said, "So, General Dieter A'Ochay, let me start with you. I understand that you're also going to celebrate a private victory today."

Dieter looked startled. What was she talking about? This was a complete departure from the outline she'd given him the previous night. He opened his mouth, searching for some kind of sensible answer.

Before he could come up with anything, Pam beamed at him. "General, I have been informed that your wife is pregnant."

The look on Dieter's face said it all. He'd had no idea that Pam was expecting.

Danny was the first to break the stunned silence with a quick comment to Dieter, then all those gathered in the studio broke into cheers. New life was now an event to be celebrated as much as any hero. A population of seven billion souls whittled down to a few million worldwide meant that all life was once again considered precious.

"So, you know boy or girl?" asked Sergeant Hanna Massey, struggling with her new language. As broken as it was, she was grateful to be able to communicate.

"We are going to let it be a surprise," replied Pam, with another smile.

She shifted into reporter mode and the interview continued well into the day. Those watching began to fully realize the enormous cost of what the three brave individuals and the millions who had died had done to save humanity.

Near the end of the program, Pam said to Danny, "I understand you have been given a place in government. Any plans for the future? The elections are just months away now."

Danny politely answered in the typical noncommittal language of a politician, and it was

obvious to all that he must someday be the new world leader.

Pam looked at Hanna and asked, "Are you planning to return to Germany?"

The color came up in Hanna's face. "No, I stay here. I get married soon."

Everyone cheered again and Pam was delighted. "Congratulations!" She looked into the nearest camera. "And to all of us. It will be wonderful to live a normal life again."



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Did Danny become world leader? Yes, Reader, he did. When the elections were held, he became the first native American Indian president of the world's remaining population.

It was a heavy responsibility, but he kept his sense of humor. Because, no matter his high status, his friends never let him forget the stunt he had pulled after the destruction of the alien mother ship, when he was heading toward the space shuttle sent to rescue him, waving an American flag.

A few months later, Pam gave birth to her son, Gerry. She took him with her nearly everywhere, though she and Dieter were very active in rebuilding the world's news headquarters. Being head of the media allowed Pam to achieve an old dream. She made it a point, every day, to broadcast good news as well as bad, to provide a balanced look at the world.

No, for the first few years, humanity didn't spend much time on space travel. Because so much of the population had been destroyed by the war, the task of rebuilding society and mending the Earth took precedence. New life was greeted with much joy, so babies were a big thing.

Why wasn't Charger interviewed?

That's a good question, but think back to the beginning of this story, Reader. Humanity created him to kill, and he did such a good job of killing that people were both shocked and deeply disgusted. They didn't want to be reminded of what they had created or what he had done. And he's not pretty, you know.

No, people probably wouldn't have wanted to see him on their TV screen.

What happened to Charger? He went where all soldiers go in peacetime, to clear rubble, build roads, and do whatever else they're asked to do.

The werewolves, too? Oh, you mean Mac and Jill, the Lycans. Yes, they went with Charger because the three were linked for life.

Why do you want to know what happened to Henry's girlfriend?

Oh, I see, Henry cared about her, and so you care about her. Well, I can't argue with that. You'll be happy to know she survived and in a way that may surprise you.



Beth said quietly to the young girl who seemed to be dying in her arms, "After the invasion began, so many good people perished that I felt guilty because I survived." The blood from Anna's wound was warm and flowing down Beth's arms. For a moment, Beth relished the heat from the girl's fading life force. Months had passed in this frozen wasteland without the heat of the sun warming her pale, tired face.

"I tried to reach him before we were evacuated, I really did, but my parents were in such a panic that I had no chance." The pain of the loss of her love made her choke up and her voice

break. "I was sixteen when we met. He was my first and only lover." Beth tried to continue, but the emotions welling up from deep inside made her sob aloud.

"What was his name?" the dying girl asked in a faint voice.

"Henry," Beth said, fighting down the sobs and trying to regain her composure. "His name was Henry, though most of his friends called him Charger. And that's what he called himself when he came home on leave that one time."

Beth shivered, then went on. "I met him in tenth grade. He was in my English class, and he was beautiful. All my friends told me he was no good, that he was a loser and would never amount to anything, but I didn't care. To me, he was the kindest and funniest guy I'd ever known."

"Did you...you know...ever do it?" Anna asked, as her breathing became more labored.

"Not at first, no. We dated for almost six months before that happened," Beth said. "He spent most of his time working in his dad's gas station out on the highway, so our time together was limited. My father disapproved of him because he didn't like Henry's father, and they never got along. And he kept saying Henry was weird. I think my mom liked Henry's dad, though. I know for a fact she liked Henry."

Refugees had been in the frozen reaches of the arctic ice fields for nearly four months, and more came all the time. Though the military tried desperately to ensure that these survivors were well taken care of, it was still difficult to endure the constant cold. Beth and Anna, like other young people, had volunteered to ride out on snowmobiles every day, scouting for invaders who might be trying to reach the survivors.

Only an hour ago, Anna's snowmobile had hit a crevasse and flipped, injuring her badly. Beth radioed for help, and they were now waiting for the search party to reach them. The cold of the falling snow and the bleakness of the high arctic sent another shiver through Beth as she held her friend close.

"Tell me more. It keeps me from thinking about the pain," Anna pleaded.

Beth drew her friend closer, trying to keep her warm. "After high school, we planned to travel to France and then to England. But when the school year ended, Henry's father needed help at the gas station and we put off our travels, though we often talked about when and how we would eventually go. The day never came, though. The invasion put an end to that dream."

Seeing that Anna was listening, Beth went on. "Henry and Dal, his friend, decided to run off and join the fighting. I tried to persuade him to run away with me, go to the mountains, but he was determined to fight. I had gotten pregnant a few years earlier, but that ended badly. A week before he left for the army base, I got pregnant again, but I never told him."

Anna looked up at Beth and asked, "So you're pregnant now?"

"Yes, I am."

"You can't stay with me!" Anna coughed as blood from her wounds filled her mouth. "I don't want to be responsible for a miscarriage. Go! Leave me!"

"I'm sure the rescue team will find us soon. We just have to wait a little longer." Beth's eyes welled up with tears again. "I can't lose you too. You're my only friend."

Nor did she have a family now. An influenza epidemic had hit the northern camps less than a month after they arrived, and both her parents died.

Anna held tightly to Beth's arm. "Didn't you tell Henry about the baby when he came home on leave?"

"I wanted to, but I couldn't," Beth said, remembering the pain of that visit. He'd been changed so much that he didn't seem like Henry anymore. It wasn't just his towering strength and

his Hyborg armor, but he seemed different mentally, too. She'd been afraid of him. He'd seen the fear in her eyes, and she knew he'd been hurt because of it, but she couldn't help herself.

The two girls held each other close as the falling snow continued covering them. When they stopped talking, the beeping from their transponder was the only sound in the inhospitable landscape.

Beth began to panic. Anna was becoming less responsive and was surely moments from death, and the constant fear that a polar bear, smelling blood, would find them before the rescue team could get there haunted Beth's mind. Minutes felt like hours. But, from off in the distance, the sound of the rescue team finally came.

Two days later, Beth and Anna woke up in the village hospital, alive but weak. When the hospital staff discovered that Beth was pregnant, the decision was made not to let the girls participate again in the perimeter watch program.

The village had once been a small, simple Inuit settlement in the high north but now, because of the invaders, it had become a sanctuary for survivors from all parts of Canada and America. The population had exploded and buildings to house the survivors dotted the horizon on all sides, as thousands of beleaguered humans arrived.

Beth gave birth to a baby boy. She and Anna found other tasks to help the village be productive, while the refugees waited for the military to eventually drive off the invaders. When the day came, a little more than two years later, with news that the war was over and the people could return home, the two friends decided to remain in the frozen north as a couple. They wanted to help the Inuit in return for the kindness these good people had shown them.

Beth never knew what became of Henry; whether he had perished in battle or was still being used by the military as the Hyborg, Charger. He'd told her they couldn't change him back to Henry, and hinted she should find someone else.

She bore silently the sadness she felt at the loss of her love, but every day she smiled at his reflection in the face of her son.

And every day, the sun shone down on a prosperous, peaceful Earth. People began to think that it would always be that way.

Chapter 18 The Bat Cave

"Okay, so what you're telling me is that the invaders we spent three years fighting were not aliens after all, but humans who existed on earth before the last ice age?" Mark Dixon was thin and bore a scar on the left side of his face where a piece of shrapnel had plowed a small furrow.

Andy wondered where Mark had found the suede jacket he was wearing. His friend must have scrounged it from some bombed-out house or store. Only seven years had passed since the war ended and now, in 2040, luxury goods were still scarce.

Andy pulled a coin out of his worn jeans for the vending machine. "That's correct. The data we've recovered and transcribed tell a story of the protohumans of Earth. They might have been the mythical Atlantians, though they were far more savvy technologically than past storytellers ever imagined. These people knew another ice age was coming and that they couldn't survive on Earth for long." He shook his dark hair out of his eyes. "Somehow, by a means we still haven't identified, their colony moved from Earth into outer space. They formed a colony on the world we now call Neo Terra, the world that we traced from information on their spacecraft."

Mark started to ask a question, then stopped. Andy could tell he was having difficulty digesting this information. It seemed contrary to all the archaeological records, which were, however, tainted by government and military staff who wanted the propaganda they had created about vicious aliens to remain firm and unaltered. These people were convinced that fostering hatred of anything alien fueled the population's drive not only to rebuild but also to take revenge.

Andy pressed on. "They may have moved into underground caverns, converting them to survival bunkers at first, along with their grounded ship, or they somehow mined the planet to get inside. We don't know how they achieved this, but we do know what followed: towns, then cities, and finally countries."

Mark looked as though he needed more persuasion. He'd make a fine scientist, Andy thought, but first he'd have to truly understand, right to the core of his brain, that no old theories nor old information were sacred.

"These people eventually found a way to hollow the world enough that a false sky and a sun were possible. Their adaptation to this dark, hollow world brought a change to their own human forms. But they used their technology to create a world very similar to the original Earth they came from."

"What you're saying makes sense, I suppose," Mark grumbled. "The so-called aliens apparently had no problems breathing here on Earth. And we had no difficulty in reverse engineering their technology."

"That's because they were us," Andy said. "We fought humans, not aliens." He tried to sound nonchalant, but he was excited about this incredible new information which solved so many mysteries arising in the past ten years.

"So, what about the Grays? How come we have yet to prove their existence?" asked Mark. He looked irritated.

A third voice joined the conversation. Mark's long-time friend, Mickey, had just joined them in front of the vending machines. "Mark likes to believe in those theories of an alien race that visited Earth thousands of years ago and performed scientific experiments on captured humans."

"That's what the military wants us to believe, too," Andy said. "They have the idea that soldiers fight harder when they hate the enemy." He pulled a can of root beer from the soft drink

dispenser. "I don't know whether Gray aliens exist or don't exist. So far, we've found no data regarding them on Neo Terra. Surely we would have come across something by now."

Mark capitulated. "Okay, so that explains why reverse engineering was so easy after the tech geeks cracked the codes. These technologies were human in origin and so followed a basic Earth way of thinking."

"Most things about the so-called aliens make sense now," Andy replied. "The multi-faceted eyes were goggles. The encounter suits protected them from their environment. The weird envelopes of slime they wore in battle were a defense against us. The weapons they used, the modes of transport, all things once thought alien, arose from the human mind."

Mickey ran a hand through his rat's nest of curly red hair. "It's said that contact with nonhuman aliens would be very different, based of course on how those aliens have evolved."

"I think that's true," Andy said, and paused to suck heavily from the root beer can. "But I can't help wondering if some parts of religion may have been correct after all."

"How do you mean?" Mark asked.

Andy belched. He should quit drinking so much carbonated stuff. "Think about the theory that some type of god created humans, and the fact that we have yet to find nonhuman aliens."

"That may not prove true in the future," Mickey said. "Now that we have space travel, we could be in for a few surprises."

Mark nodded. "We might discover that humans left Earth several times in the past, reinvented themselves to survive distant worlds, and forgot about where they originated."

"That seems entirely possible." Andy regretfully added, "However, with our propensity for aggression, it also seems possible we will end up in yet another battle."

"Sad but true," Mickey said. "For a start, there's the extinction of Neanderthals, said to have been caused by a different human species either through war or inter-breeding." He tried to grab Andy's root beer.

"Hey! Back off, short stuff!" Andy batted Mickey's hand away. Mickey might be the smallest of the three friends, but he was often the most aggressive. "We've set foot on one distant planet, so finding a third isn't inconceivable. And, to date, no physical record of human society from before the last ice age has been found."

Mark got back into the conversation. "That could change, too. I agree that all stone monuments found at today's earth strata are from our own time period, but a friend of mine using ground-penetrating radar has made a few discoveries of deep structures that haven't been uncovered yet."

"Humanity builds cities next to water sources found on the surface," Mickey said. "We've always done that. Thanks to the invasion destroying cities and towns around the shores of inland water as well as the ocean, it's easy now to find ancient ruins."

"So, these structures your friend found, what are they like?" Andy asked as he eyed the mostly empty shelves in the snack vending machine.

"He doesn't know. It's hard to get funding these days," Mark replied. "He got some help from staff but had conflicts with those who still believe the world is flat, which makes it difficult for him to proceed. But what he's found is very deep under destroyed cities."

"Deep? How deep?" Mickey asked. He might be able to use such information in his thesis on human evolution in societies.

"In one find," Mark replied, "a core sample, taken by drilling down to the relevant level, showed that the structure was made of a type of concrete and asphalt, therefore constructed by humans. The soil underneath the structure was actually thirty million years old, but it's now

thought, from cores done at different locations, that the soil was exposed only during the time the structure was built."

Mark leaned back against the wall. "The theory is that this structure was created possibly two or three ice ages back, dating it too roughly between forty and fifty thousand years ago. That would be well within the range of *Homo sapiens sapiens* evolution and the extinction of the Neanderthals. The theory is that the structure must be of a primitive design since any modern building techniques would never stand the test of that much time. So we might have the equivalent of the pyramids in this ancient structure. Not only that, but it's possible that more recent societies living on this site may have been the founders of the mythical Atlantis structure."

Mickey snorted. "Well, that topic is still up for debate! The idea of the Atlantis structure is fragmentary at best. We should not be so quick to include myths in today's science."

"I think we have more than sufficient evidence from Dr. Opinhimmer's work at Gobekli Tepe," Mark replied, with a challenging look. "The three stone rings he and his team uncovered clearly show the location and the time at which Atlantis existed. The first ring showed the location of the three-ringed cities around the globe in relation to the continents and shorelines of that time. The second ring does suggest a time frame in which these cities and their peoples lived here on Earth, and the third ring shows that the only mistake to date was the naming of that society as Atlantis."

Andy smiled and waited for the rebuttals. The three graduate students had developed a fast friendship at New Denver University, and they all liked arguing.

After a short pause, Mark added, "There was also the work done by that British fellow, I forget his name. The guy who thought that the works of Stonehenge had something to do with the Atlantis myth."

"I remember him," Andy said. "Still, without the keystone he insists has to be real, the true combination of elements and their order will never be known. So far, we've determined only that mercury, manganese, gold, rhenium, and bismuth are the base elements listed in the old writings. The keystone element meant to activate the entire stone acropolis may never be found."

"But we do know that the thirteen stone circles buried 10,000 years ago at Gobekli Tepe had nothing to do with religious beliefs," Mark added firmly, as if no one could possibly doubt his words. "Instead, they seemed to be an attempt to communicate with departed humans. What scientists are now suggesting is that by digging up these ancient sites found by ground-penetrating radar, we might at last find the keystone."

Andy decided he'd had enough of standing around, and led the other two down the University hall to a small room called the Bat Cave. The walls were adorned with posters depicting ancient societies and science fiction battles in space. The men flopped into their usual seats with more soda and the last bag of potato chips from the vending machine. After a few minutes of munching, Mickey offered a suggestion.

"Maybe they evolved a culture that didn't believe in a god. Without any religious influence, they might have invented things that allowed them to attain space flight quickly. If the church hadn't forbidden knowledge discovered by the scientists of long ago, our society would certainly be further along in its evolution. Discoveries by Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and many others, were suppressed. Otherwise, humanity might have landed on the moon in the 1600s." Mickey took a breath. "Remember, it took barely a hundred years to go from horse and buggy to space flight, and that happened only because mankind threw off religious dogma."

Mark shifted in his seat, but Mickey beat him to the imaginary podium again. "These people may have created a thriving society 15,000 years back and developed the technology for space

travel in order to escape the oncoming ice age. Those not deemed worthy to leave, or who were too stubborn or stupid to go, remained behind to fall into the first dark age. Consider removing the heavy fur covering of Neanderthals, or *Homo heidelbergensis*, and replacing it with modern clothing."

Mickey grabbed the nearly empty potato chip bag out of Andy's lap. "Maybe they were more intelligent than we tend to think, with our superior sense of self-worth. It's only because we find fossils scattered around in areas of sparse vegetation that we perceive them as less intelligent. They may just have been the fools left behind, fighting to survive with the tools they could make by hand. Small brain size does not always mean lesser intelligence. We are still not sure of all the areas mapped out in our own brains, and the relevance of the unused areas."

Mark's expression became intense. "If humans were created that long ago, it only stands to reason that some great unseen force must have been responsible for our existence. In our travel to space, we've so far only found one world populated with different humans. I put it to you that we will never find aliens, for man has been the only creation of God."

Mickey spoke up, his tone respectful but firm. He was an anthropology student, grounded deeply in the roots of hard-core science. He often found it difficult to converse with people who wandered from the facts, but because of his long-time friendship with Mark, he always went the extra mile in tolerance.

"There were old cultures addicted to a type of LSD made from wheat that creates paranoia but does not diminish intelligence," Mickey said. "The group that left Earth were maybe elitists, like the old Heaven's Gate cult, who believed they were actually extra-terrestrials chosen for eternal survival. The planet this group found was a rogue planet, drifting into the path of their spaceship, a carbon-rich planet with ice reserves found in caves. Bacteria-ridden ice created mutations in the human genome, creating the so-called aliens that invaded Earth. Hardly seems like the work of a guiding hand."

Mark licked potato chip salt off his fingers. "Well, think about this. The universe is too immense for the average mind to truly understand its size. The distance from one side to the other of the visible universe is estimated to be about one hundred billion light years. A light year is equal to 186,000 miles per second of speed, and a spaceship would need to travel at the speed of light for one year to cross the universe. The universe is still expanding, too, so for every second of our human life, the visible edge of the known universe is moving away from us at an incredible speed."

Andy decided not to interrupt.

"Imagine someone pulls the pin of a hand grenade and the explosion sends metal fragments outward in all directions," Mark said, warming to his argument. "Imagine we live on one of those fragments going south, and another life form is on another fragment going west. We will never meet. That's the basic principle of the Big Bang theory, but it is more incredible than just that."

He took a deep breath. "As those fragments travel away from the starting point of the explosion, the starting point is left empty and that's a problem. Nothing in our universe is ever empty, God has seen to that. Hence the terms 'dark matter' and 'missing mass.' The universe may be filled with rogue black planets, which would mean that our spaceships need strong headlights to prevent us from crashing into things we can't see."

He paced to the door and back again. "Or, beyond the rim of the visible known universe, there's another universe, an anti-universe that is being sucked into the empty space at the center of our universe to fill the void that is the result of the original explosion. There is evidence for this in the form of antimatter, which is a scientific fact. I ask you both, how could all that be

designed to work, except by a God with a divine purpose?"

"Arrggh! Mark, you always do that!" Mickey said, his tone betraying irritation. "You use science to prove one thing, in the broadest strokes possible. It's like a game with you, your team has to be right, has to win, no matter the cost. You use science when it suits your personal needs, to better your team's chances of winning, and reject science when it contradicts what you believe in. Science that disagrees with your team's position is disregarded. It's like having only half an argument."

"But don't you see, Mickey, that's exactly how I feel when you disregard God as a possibility, you're doing only half an argument," Mark said, his tone almost pleading.

"There you go again, playing the sympathy card. It's your typical game, like I said. I might as well suggest that blue monkeys crap out golden pigeons in the forest, which then fly off and start forest fires with their acidic urine. Science exists for the betterment of knowledge, no matter what the cost to our own personal beliefs. When a theory is proven wrong in science, it is summarily dismissed. Not so in religion, you twist things until they fit your beliefs."

Andy could see that Mickey had lost patience with Mark's 'dogma,' but they'd resolve the argument. They always did.

"I am entitled to believe in whatever fits with my personal needs," Mark said firmly. "I would also suggest that the missing keystone we never seem to find might actually be humans, in our belief."

"What, are you crazy? Have you finally lost it?" Mickey said in a teasing way. "So, we all hold hands and sing Kumbaya around Stonehenge?"

Andy finally decided to add his thoughts. "Mark might be onto something. He might be right, but for the wrong reasons. I don't think a god would design a keystone of humans, but a man might. What if the missing keystone is some type of human DNA fragment to activate the thing? What if the lost human culture from so long ago used personal DNA typology in the activation of their computers?"

"There, Mark, you see that!" Mickey's words were gleeful. He jumped up from his chair, pointed at Andy and waved his arms dramatically. "That's a theory, a truly crazy and terrible nut-bar type theory, but a theory nonetheless. It proves that our friend Andy has been watching those old library videos of spacemen traveling the galaxy in tight leather suits. He can now take his DNA and mix it into the dissimilar metals that have been proven to be the main ingredients needed, and presto, the combination will result in Andy losing the respect of any logical, thinking human on the planet." Mickey laughed. "Wait, wait, it gets better! Andy can just piss in the cosmic mixing bowl, activating Stonehenge in a bid to communicate with your buddy, god."

"So, you're saying it's a bit out there?" Andy asked, trying to look serious.

The room was quiet for a moment, then Mickey burst out laughing. The other two joined in and the small Bat Cave rang with the laughter these three men often shared.

Mark finally said, "Okay, we've got to stop doing this daily exploration into the workings of logic. I'm getting tired of always being the religious guy. Maybe Andy should be the religious guy for a while, and I can do the science thing. That leaves Mickey as the 'Aliens were god' guy."

"Oh no!" Mickey exclaimed. "I did the 'Aliens were god' guy all last week. It has to be someone else's turn."

Andy held up his hand for silence. "Since I am the leader of this little society, I get to decide that. Remember, we can never truly understand all facets of an argument until we have fully been immersed in each part. We don't do this to be assholes; we do this to fully adhere to the basic principles of a fair and even debate. To do justice to an argument, we need to be able to

distinguish truth and reasoning from emotion and belief."

Andy rose. "Besides, Mark, I don't get the feeling of a truly religious understanding from you. You need to do more research on the topic, to create more robust and complex arguments. Also, Mickey, you need to tone down the snide comments and refocus your thinking in a more logical manner. You're adding too many emotions to the process."

"Yes, I guess you're right," Mickey said, looking sober now. "I'll try to tone it down in the future."

Andy knew, and so did the other two, that they could never hope to find the answer of the missing keystone. But they could contribute to a full understanding of the topic, given enough time. After all, their thesis papers for graduation depended on it.

The door to the Bat Cave burst open and a young pimple-faced kid stuck his head in, saying, "They did it, they got it, they figured out the keystone, it's on the vid, you got to come see this!"

Mark tripped over Andy in a rush to get out the door, as Mickey, falling out of his chair, gathered himself up off the floor. They raced down the hall to a large, crowded room where several other students huddled around different monitors, all talking and pointing in disbelief at what they saw.

There, on the video, was the image of Stonehenge, fully rebuilt to its original historic condition. Flashes and arcs of brilliant violet light mixed with sprays of blackened sparks emanated from the stones and launched themselves into the air in random patterns.

The cameramen at the site fought to keep their footing, for the very ground seemed to heave and shudder. Dark green clouds formed in the skies above the area, with thunder echoing from them. Scientists close to the calamity were retreating.

The blue stones of the circle began to emit a faint glow, like an electrical wire short-circuiting. Someone near a mike gasped that the air was foul and hard to breathe. All around the stone circle, grass spontaneously caught fire. A few of the expedition team members standing too close also burst into flames. The scene was chaotic, with people yelling, or scrambling for cover, or trying to render aid.

Suddenly, the center of the stone circle burst to life. A huge white beam of blazing hot light shot from the ground straight up into space. Several violent blasts of air exploded out from the ring, sending those nearby flying through the air like rag dolls, knocking instruments and light stands down everywhere.

"This is impossible! This can't be happening!" Andy bellowed.

"I'd agree with you Andy, but shit... there it is!" replied a bewildered Mark. "I think the keystone to the creation of man has been found!"



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Andy was right. It was impossible. No amount of dissimilar metals mixed with rocks in any configuration could possibly have been responsible for this.

And it wasn't.

But deep below Stonehenge, below any investigations with ground penetrating radar, lay the remains of one of the first technological cities of the old world's culture. A city that tapped the very center of Earth for power, a city built by the first humans who left Earth eons ago as pure energy. A city now revived to life with the aid of the stone ring. A city built by people descended from the First Ones, with stories and forgotten technologies based on the transmission of power

through wireless means.

Yes, Reader, Tesla had been right.

Far below the stone ring, a city stirred to life, sending a signal back to the surface. For several days the light beam blazed from the center of the stone ring into space as the planet rotated, then weakened, and finally shut down.

It had been seven years since the war with the Mahoud people ended, during which time a devastated Earth struggled to regain its footing. Even though the descendants of Earth had colonized a new world, Neo Terra, and technology was expanding in all directions, humanity was still barely clinging to existence.

What had man just triggered?

What humans always trigger, Reader. Trouble.



Two years had passed since the signal from Stonehenge beamed out into space at light speed and, in that time, much of the soil covering the city deep beneath the site had been excavated. Andy had gained a professorship and taken Mark and Mickey as his grad students. All three joined the dig team studying this ancient city and, almost daily, something new and important was brought back to the surface.

On this particular day, it was an old piece of broken pottery which brought new insight into the daily lives of the city's people. So far, it had been learned that these people lived much like early Romans, with the same type of clothing and simple stone houses, and that they used pottery for cooking and eating. The climate then had been consistently warm, with enough rainfall that their diet was abundant and varied.

Classes were held outside, and it appeared from wall pictures that walking and a type of bicycle seemed to be the norm for travel. There were, however, remnants of vehicles which had a type of ceramic combustion engine that ran on water and radioactive particles from the earth. They were steam-powered but, instead of piston-driven, these motors were disk-driven, like the Wankel engine on its side, mixed with centrifugal force weights. Roads were well-paved with a heavy, solid limestone, and buildings were placed in accordance with the lay of the land, not in straight rows.

It appeared to be a life in harmony with its environment, mixed with as yet unknown technology. A central place of knowledge was discovered, based on fossilized remains of unique computers. Rather than copper wires and diodes, mixed with plastics and gold, these people used a biological mass, determined from impressions left in the fossils, much like the feather imprints in Mesozoic birds.

The data these people had gained were lost forever. The biomass had long since rotted away and been replaced by minerals. But they did have writing and now Andy held a piece of pottery made of silicate and carbon elements marked heavily with ancient words.

Making his way to the surface and then into the building that housed his office, he entered the small room and spoke to Mark. "Here! See, I was right! The words on these containers must describe what the containers hold. I found another jug containing coal, just like the one found on the eastern side of the city, and both have the same pattern of symbols." He placed the piece on the table for Mark to inspect.

"Damn it, man! Why don't you start publishing this stuff? It could help a lot of people," Mark said as he turned the broken piece over in his hand.

Mickey came in. "Just heard from the dig master, they got through the door to the temple complex in the center of the city. Wanna go have a look?"

"Hell, yeah!" Mark said, and the three hurried back down to the old city below. The center complex was shaped like a pyramid with crystal spires reaching skyward from the four sides, and was thought to be the point from which the beam of light had emanated and passed through Stonehenge into space. Gaining entrance to this place might finally answer a lot of burning questions.

The dig master said over the loudspeakers, "The robot has been sent in for a good look around. No one else goes in until I say the word. And only some of you will go, based on my opinion of who needs to see what's there. That is final."

With faces glued to the monitors set up all around, hundreds of scientists waited patiently for the first images. A small robot about the size of a house cat, attached to a helium balloon and powered by small motors, hovered into the dark room. The command was given to 'light it up,' and a few dozen small spotlights blinked on, unveiling an incredible sight. The small robot sent back to the monitors stunning images of pictures on the walls. These pictures seemed to move with the motion of the robot, as if they were three-dimensional.

Everywhere there were pictures of people doing daily tasks. Hands outstretched seemed to welcome the viewer, as eyes appeared to blink, and mouths moved, forming smiles. Pictures of several cities and a map came into view, showing the vastness of this old culture. The walls seemed endless, depicting information that would certainly take generations to decipher. The small robot hovered around several obstacles, small pedestals that showcased amazing technologies. Each wall picture sent scientists of different disciplines into raptures of excitement.

The robot went down several hallways and finally into a vast room, almost too large to fully illuminate. At the center stood a large statue on a pedestal. Oddly, the figure did not look entirely human. It appeared to be something like a bipedal dinosaur, characteristically humanoid, but with reptilian features. This stunned the crowd to silence, for the implications of this discovery were devastating.

Chapter 19 Blackmail in New Denver

Once the chaos of war had ended and the world started picking up the pieces, Pam and Dieter tried to celebrate each day of their survival in some small way. On this particular day, they decided to celebrate the seventh anniversary of the end of the war as well as the continuing gift of life. They drove to the coast, which was still barren and desolate, but they were happy with each other and with their six-year-old son, Gerry.

Therefore, the phone call that interrupted their walk along the shore was more than annoying. Pam had been looking forward to a day free from work.

When she arrived at the media station, Dean said, "Sorry to spoil your day, but I need you to talk to Danny and see if he'll release more information about the Revenge Program."

"Why can't you do it?" she asked.

Dean shrugged. "You're his friend; I'm not. I've tried to pry some facts out of him, but I can't get anywhere."

Pam finally got a call through to Danny, but she didn't fare any better than Dean. Had the Revenge Program been delayed so long by reverse engineering alien ships that people were losing interest? Maybe seven years was too long to maintain the white-hot anger people had felt against the aliens. The first thing they'd wanted when the last alien on Earth had been killed, was to go to the aliens' planet and wipe out the rest of them. Danny had been elected world president because he promised they could have that revenge.

Pam sat in her car and mused for a moment on how much Danny had changed over the years since the war. He still had a sense of humor, but it was beginning to crack. The conversation she'd had with him lacked even a shred of his famous quick wit. But maybe it wasn't surprising. As world president, he had heavy responsibilities. Only two continents were being occupied, and the peoples of those two continents had decided that they would be governed by a single prime minister for each continent and these prime ministers would report to a common president.

It began to rain again, and she decided that going home was her best move. With the windshield wipers slapping across the front window of her car, Pam drove into the night, heading back to New Denver, back to her husband and son.

The main roads she traveled were almost deserted. With so much of Earth burned to a cinder by the invaders, cars were scarce and only a select few had the privilege of being able to drive. Pam turned her car down the lane to her house and slowly drove the remaining distance, staring through the rainy windshield at all the empty or burned houses on her street.

She placed her car keys carefully on the wall hook and made her way to the living room. "Funny," she commented to Dieter, who lay sprawled on the living room sofa, "I spoke with Danny today. He seems so different now, like all the fun has been sucked out of that playful noodle he has on his shoulders."

Pulling the bag of potato chips off his chest and sitting upright, Dieter replied, his German accent thicker than usual. "Vell, I guess it is to be expected. He was the one that killed the alien leader."

"Vell..." Pam teased. "The word is 'well,' and when are you going to learn to speak English well?"

"Ven you learn German, I guess." Both of them laughed.

Morning came too soon. The light shone in the bedroom window, waking Dieter first, who

always staggered off to the bathroom to gargle loudly. Pam did not mind much, but she pulled the covers over her head again.

"Rise und shine, sleepy head," Dieter said as he entered the bedroom.

"'And,' the word is 'and.' You are such a blockhead," Pam said. She giggled and hid under the bed sheets.

Dieter jumped on the bed and said, "And, and, and get up, or I slap your big round ass." At that moment, Gerry trotted into the bedroom.

"Are we going to play today?" he asked.

That seemed like a great idea to Pam and Dieter, and part of the remaining morning was spent rolling and playing on the bed like three over-sized kittens.

The phone rang and, when Pam answered, Dean asked, "Where the heck did you get to last night?"

"I didn't succeed with Danny, so I decided to come home and enjoy the last hour or two of my so-called vacation. Is that a problem?"

"Damn right it is. I just got chewed out for the last few hours by General Harris. Rode my back side hard and never even offered to kiss me after."

"Dean, this gay joke kick you've been on for the last month is getting old," Pam said with a sigh.

"Well, what do you expect? Nearly seven billion people wiped out and almost no gay survivors. At least you have a man!" snapped Dean.

"So what do you want?" Pam was exasperated.

"Can you come in today? I think I found a lead on the Revenge Program."

Pam agreed, and soon she was making her way toward the news tower. The day was bright and the sky blue. All seemed good in the world. She had just turned the corner, about a block from the tower's basement entrance, when a missile screamed overhead and slammed into the news building. A huge fireball erupted and the blast shattered windows and doors, sending debris and smoke everywhere, knocking her car sideways and deploying the air bags.

When Pam regained consciousness, she was in a stark white hospital bed, with Dieter hovering nervously close by. "What happened?" she managed to ask.

Dieter spoke quietly. "There was a terrorist attack. The police have already received a letter from those taking responsibility."

"Terrorists? After all we have been through, terrorists? What do they have against the news?" Pam managed to squeak out as she tried to sit up in bed. She had not been hurt badly, just a few bumps and bruises, but she winced at the pain.

"Do not push yourself; you have been shook up quite badly," Dieter said gently, putting a pillow behind her back.

When she settled down, he continued. "There is bad news I give you. Dean is dead."

Pam winced again, this time from emotion. Dean, despite his foibles, had been a good and loyal friend.

"There is more," Dieter said. "The terrorists demand that a city a hundred miles south of here be repaired und supplied for them, und support given by government. They seek division. They do not wish to coexist with gays."

The shock and dismay Pam felt was written all over her face. More than six billion people dead, barely fifty million survivors worldwide, the number that once, at the start of the twenty-first century, had been the combined population of just two states, California and Texas. And now the survivors wanted artificial divisions.

"They call themselves 'purists,' and wish nothing to do with those they consider unclean," Dieter finished.

The news sent Pam spiraling into a deep depression. Yet again, humans were refusing to set aside their differences. With the common enemy defeated, old habits of prejudice and hatred had resurfaced.

Unwilling to be held hostage to the stupidity of others, the government conceded, and began the slow, arduous task of establishing cities committed to those of similar beliefs and ideologies. With great swaths of land decimated by the conflict, however, food crops took precedence, and only those lands not dedicated to feeding the population were allocated for human habitation.

Pam soon recovered from the effects of the blast and went back to work as head of the world media. She fought hard to report the news with an unbiased sense of responsibility, but eventually, even she fell into the trap of biased reporting on the problems cities of differing ideologies faced. They somehow seemed of lesser importance than the residents of New Denver.

Danny, as world president, made every effort to accommodate the differing lifestyles the remaining populations clung to, but the effort galled him.

Chapter 20 Talking to Dinosauroids

"We believe that some sixty-five million years ago, the dinosaurs and many of the other species on our planet were wiped out by the impact of an asteroid in the Yucatan peninsula."

Doctor Curtis spoke to a group of eager, bright young minds in his virtual lecture room. The University of New Denver, or NDU as the students called it, was a progressive and vibrant campus. Unlike the universities at the start of the twenty-first century, these new campuses were designed to immerse students in a virtual world of learning. Classes might be held in local coffee shops, or while exercising, and sometimes even in a traditional classroom environment. There was a greater focus on learning in a manner that best fit each student and was, therefore, not based on attendance in a particular building. The students were responsible for absorbing the required knowledge, then passing the exams. Professors no longer had to assume the duty of making sure that students attended classes.

"However, we have found clear and extensive evidence that, in what used to be known as Australia, some dinosaurs survived the asteroid impact and thrived for an additional ten million years," Doctor Curtis continued. "We have also found evidence that the dinosaurs seemed to be dying off some ten million years before the impact event. So, there's a bit of a conundrum here. In certain parts of the world, a vast die-off was happening, possibly due to diseases. Then an extinction event followed that did not kill all the dinosaurs but left some to thrive for an additional period of time, secluded as they were on an island continent."

Phil, as he was known to his students, was a hippy type of the past, usually with a book in his face as he wandered the halls of the campus. He was often described as 'that guy with the busy feet,' for it seemed he was always moving.

"The curious thing is the type of Dinosauroid that survived, and I use the term Dinosauroid deliberately. For it seems that the simple Troodont, a small meat eater, bipedal in design, produced the most common kind of fossil remains we've found. These five-foot-tall dinosaurs apparently had enough time to evolve into large-brained, possibly highly intelligent creatures. We think they hunted in packs and had a social lifestyle similar to wolves."

Phil pressed a few buttons, and before the eyes of his students appeared three-dimensional pictures which identified bones and their placement on the specimen. "You can clearly see here, and here, that the backs of the skulls have enlarged, the neck has shortened, and an almost human-like upright posture has evolved." Phil pointed to aspects of the small image in virtual space.

"Now, I'm not suggesting that these Troodont drove cars." Several students chuckled. "But I am suggesting that the Dinosauroids seemed to have evolved some rather puzzling qualities."

The bell pinged and Doctor Curtis dismissed his class for the day. He wandered back down the halls to his favorite haunt to immerse himself in a book. He enjoyed reading anything related to science, devouring book after book in his spare time, often those that had little, if anything to do with paleontology.

A stocky man with dark hair and brown eyes approached Phil and introduced himself as Doctor Andy Kent. "By god, you're an impossible man to track down. I must have asked fifty people where you were, and was told to just keep wandering the halls, and eventually I would stumble over you."

Phil gave him an odd look, for this was not the typical greeting one would expect from a

stranger. He responded with a long drawn-out "Okaaay..."

"I'm hoping to persuade you to fly back to England with me. I'm part of the team working on the city discovered under Stonehenge, and we've found some stuff that we think you might be able to help us with," Andy said, as he looked for a place to sit down.

"You found dinosaur fossils in this city?" Phil asked, with a chuckle.

"Oh, it's odder than that," replied Andy, who could not help responding with a smug smile. "I study cultures, which is why I'm on the dig site. We found a door that led to a great room with many pictures on the walls. These pictures told of life in this city during its existence, really fascinating stuff!"

"If you say so," replied Phil. He really had no interest in humans. In his opinion, most of them were a complete waste of skin.

"I do. We have had teams of people in this room in the center of the complex for weeks now. The pictures tell of an amazing event, actual contact with beings which seem to be dinosaurian in nature."

That got Phil's attention. He lowered the book to his lap. "Dinosaurian? Are you sure?"

"That's why we need you. We want your experience and expertise to help us establish whether this is even possible," Andy pleaded.

"I think I can save you some time here," Phil said, as he rose to his feet, ready to walk away. "There is little to no possibility that humans ever met with dinosaurs, no matter what pictures you have found. The whole idea is just ludicrous."

"Wait! Before you go, just have a look at this statue we found, and some of the photos," Andy said, as he handed Phil a pair of 3D glasses.

Phil reluctantly put on the glasses and began viewing the images. His quick clicking through the pictures slowed as he found some he simply could not dismiss. After a bit, he stopped clicking the images forward and began backing up to review pictures he had seen moments earlier. He was stunned by what he was seeing. Forward and back, click after click, Phil repeatedly examined the incredibly detailed three-dimensional images. Finally, he stopped, removed the glasses, and handed them back to Andy. "When do we go?"

"Yes!" Andy executed an enthusiastic arm-pump.

The next day found the two of them at the sky port boarding a transport to England. The flight from New Denver to Heathrow in Britain was brief; the transport ship flew into orbit, then descended to the destination. The two men gathered their gear from the holding bay and called for a ground transport to get them to the dig site's main base. Only half a day had been spent in travel, but it was growing dark when they arrived at the dig site.

"We can tackle this in the morning, if you like. There are living quarters just around back, open to all," Andy said.

"No, I'm good. I'll go look at this room you found, if it's all right with you," Phil replied, as he tossed his luggage and science gear down next to the entrance that led down to the dig site.

"Knock yourself out! I'm bagged." Andy fought back a yawn. "It's been a long day for me, so I'll see you in the morning. Just ask around and someone will guide you to the living quarters when you're done."

Phil headed down the long stairs that led to the entrance to the dig site. He passed many wandering scientists, all seemingly preoccupied with the work they carried. A young girl at the base of the stairs pointed Phil in the direction of the central room, and after some time, he managed to find the place. At first, he paid little attention to the pictures on the walls, though they seemed to move as he moved, for he had no interest in human culture. But, after only a few

seconds, he stopped walking and just stared at the pictures and pedestals that held objects upon them.

The next morning, Andy saw Phil in the immense central room and, with a mug of tea in hand, he approached and sat beside him. "Well, what great American insight can you add to all this?" Andy asked.

"I don't even know where to begin. I've been at this for hours, and I still can't come to terms with what I'm seeing." Phil sounded a little lost. He had removed a small object from one of the pedestals and was turning it over in his hands. "Look at this crystalline structure, and these pictures here that make reference to the recipients of their stellar communication as having some type of psychic power. What I mean is, one of them held this object up to the frontal portion of his skull and was thus able to speak to the aliens he contacted. This can't be real, for we know that humans have no psychic powers, and this crystal is merely a piece of mineral." Phil blew out a gusty breath. "So, part of the puzzle here is mired in pseudoscience, and part of it is based on real science!"

"So you're saying you don't have a clue as to what all this is?" Andy asked.

"On the contrary, I understand exactly what I'm looking at. It appears that the aliens being contacted were, in fact, dinosaurian in nature. However, the two cultures found no means of speaking to each other, so this pseudoscience mumbo jumbo of pressing rocks to heads was the experimenters' only way of convincing others in their society that some type of communication was happening."

"I don't get it either," Andy said, scratching his head. "Look, these pictures here show human elders telling their people that they spoke to these creatures, but the mechanisms they used are based on garbage science. However, the creatures are either descendants from the dinosaurs here on Earth, for the anatomical physiology is just too similar to be dismissed, or we have the first-ever case of convergent evolution of life forms on a different planet."

Phil placed the small object back on the pedestal. "Simply put, we have alien dinosaurs from space, or we have dinosaurs from Earth that evolved and left Earth, and then were contacted by a forgotten society of ancient humans," Phil said flatly.

"You think humans really could talk to them?" Andy asked.

Phil rocked himself back on the seat and blew out a long breath. "Okay, imagine you live back in the early 1900s, when steamships and steam engines are the norm. Someone develops the two-way radio and turns it on, and suddenly is speaking to another voice. But no one else in the world has a radio. So, who is he speaking to? These people had a science different from our own. But the other devices here are clearly based on scientific principles," Phil said, as he pointed to several pedestals around the vast room.

"Their science is more advanced than our own in some ways, and yet in others more primitive," Phil continued. "And this statue, it is clearly a cross between a dinosaur and some type of bipedal humanoid. See its physiology depicted here in the pictures? Without a doubt, if humans did speak to these things, they spoke to Dinosauroids. But I don't think that any meaningful communication could ever be had, for it is impossible for these two differing species to ever be able to understand one another."

"Then we do have a bit of a bind," Andy said. "It appears that some of the other scientists have figured out a way to turn this 'two-way radio' back on."

"I don't advise they do that, if it is a communication with a dinosaurian race. They were never known to be an understanding group of beings," Phil said cautiously.

"I have to admit I'm a bit surprised. You seem so matter of fact about this whole thing,"

Andy said with a hint of suspicion in his voice.

Phil replied quickly. "I have long been puzzled by the fossils coming to my desk from old Australia. Dinosaurs survived and developed for some ten million years after the KT boundary."

"KT?" asked Andy.

"The cretaceous tertiary boundary, KT for short, that's the point where the dinosaurs were wiped out, so we think. Ten million years of suspect fossils that seem to show an advancing physiology, and an increase in brain capacity, then nothing. Poof! They disappear from the fossil record."

The two men sat for some time staring out at the vast room and the pictures on the walls and the many pedestals of unusual items. Then Phil asked, "Hey, where did you get the tea?"

"Follow me," replied Andy, and they set off to the surface of the dig site, back to their normal world. They sat at a small table in a makeshift cafeteria tent, and Andy finally had to ask. "So... ten million years, eh? How advanced do you suppose these things could have gotten?"

"Are you kidding me?" Phil said. "The human race may have taken a few million years to get to the Industrial Revolution, but then we just took off in technology, like plants that explode into bloom after a rain. These last few hundred years, we've traveled to another world, cured many diseases, and our computers are now almost as capable of thought as we are. The problem is not how advanced did the Dinosauroids get back then, but if they are still surviving, how advanced are they now? Imagine sixty-five million years of evolution. No, we would seem like bugs to them, so we'd best hope that no signals ever reached them."

"I hate to be the one to break this to you, Phil, but the statue in that room suggests that our ancestors seem to have already contacted them," Andy said. "That beam we triggered that went out into the universe signaled our position for some time before it shut off."

"Then we had damn well better hope that our ancestors never left Earth due to that contact. If they return, we might stand little chance of surviving," Phil said.



Several weeks passed as scientists worked out the details of what life and culture had been like in this lost city. Much progress was also made in establishing the city's power grid since it closely resembled modern grids. The use of geothermal heat to drive massive steam turbines, mixed with the use of exotic subatomic particles, brought many areas of the city back to life.

In the great room with the Dinosauroid statue, one of the pedestals caught the attention of many scientists, for it held a gel-like keyboard interface, with unrecognizable symbols. Those studying it took extra caution not to press a button for fear of activating the device.

Thus, when the interface started glowing and clicking on its own, several scientists jumped back and asked who had pushed a button. No one admitted to doing so. The device was apparently being controlled from somewhere else. As it stirred to life, many stopped working on other projects and moved closer to investigate. Phil, who was studying the statue, also wandered over to investigate. Objects in the room began moving about. Then the lights went out.

The ground shook violently, and dust rained down from the stone ceiling. The room sparked with light, but not from any definable source, and a strange glow emanated from the floor. Several of the female scientists with long hair noticed that it was lifting from their heads, as if static permeated the room. Then, in the center of the room, a single light source seemed to hang in the air just feet above the floor. Everyone started to back away from the multicolored light. The light source became brighter and more intense, as it shot out tiny bolts of lightning,

producing an almost Tesla coil effect. A high-pitched whine caused several of the scientists to cover their ears. Some left the room. The room itself began to shimmer and fade.

Another room slowly seemed to meld into the room they were all standing in, and small figures came into view. This new room was dense with technology, and light from unseen sources filled it. Some of the scientists jumped, startled because another figure was standing just inches from where they were standing. The two rooms were actually merging. The room the scientists were in still existed, but was vague and hard to focus on. The new room was equally vague and difficult to see. But the small occupants of the new room were clear. They were obviously the Dinosauroids from the pictures on the wall.

One of the scientists said under her breath, but loud enough for the others to hear, "They must be in a parallel universe, with the technology to merge with ours at will." The stunned scientists realized the truth of this and were awe-struck by the incredible power these beings wielded.

The Dinosauroids had never traveled to the stars; they simply traveled to another dimension. They were and always had been on Earth; it was just that they lived several seconds into the future. Now they were pulling the two timelines parallel to make contact.

"We are so supremely fucked!" Phil spoke loudly. "I want all of you to move to the far side of the room. NOW! Don't talk, don't look at them, and don't move when you get to the other side of the room. GO NOW!"

The scientists did not hesitate. They all seemed to realize what was happening and some grabbed the dignitaries who happened to be there and forced them to comply.

One lone Dinosauroid stood in the center of the room and faced Phil. It stretched out its arm almost as if looking for a handshake. Then the hand tipped up and it made a circular motion in front of Phil. It stopped for a moment, then its hand pointed down, and a single finger of three pointed toward the ground. Phil was devastated; he had no idea what this meant.

After a moment, Phil reached for the pocket watch his grandfather had given to him as a child. He pulled it from his pocket, then lifted it to his ear. He posed that way for a moment, then handed it to the lone Dinosauroid. It held the watch to the side of its head. The Dinosauroid seemed puzzled, perhaps because it realized that the watch made no ticking sound, but instead was playing a small tune. The pocket watch would play a melody when a button was pressed on the watch face, and the Dinosauroid seemed fascinated by the music. It handed the watch to another Dinosauroid, which had appeared in the background, and it too seemed fascinated. They apparently conversed for a moment, then the watch was returned to Phil.

Phil surmised that the Dinosauroids heard music as a type of mathematics for they responded by handing Phil a small device that emitted a tone he knew was based on mathematical principles. Phil had no idea what the tones meant, but one of the attending scientists did. She approached Phil and explained that the Dinosauroid was sending tones based on a progression of mathematical sounds, and that the binary communicating device they had developed might be of some value here. After one of the binary devices was sent for, the female scientist approached the lead Dinosauroid and presented a single pen, then added another pen, then a third. This went on for some time as she tried to establish a system for counting, to build a foundation for math to be used in future communications.

It was agreed that a dot would represent the number one, and two dots the number two. This went on for some time until both the female scientist and the lead Dinosauroid had established a common mathematical groundwork. When the binary device was brought to the room, many of the group set about reprogramming it to be used to create words that both the Dinosauroids and

the humans could use in establishing a common language.

Many hours passed as the two groups labored to build a usable language with which to communicate and, when it was done, a rudimentary working device began emitting speech that both sides understood. They stood facing each other, distant cousins for millions of years on planet Earth, two worlds in parallel in a room shimmering with light and began speaking with one another.

The Dinosauroids had the technological power to keep the humans' room bridged with their universe for several days, while the two groups worked to expand the mathematical language they had created. In the fullness of time, Phil and others managed to translate the history of the Dinosauroids for researchers to examine. What follows is a brief sample, a page or two, of all that was discovered.



The history of the Dinosauroid as transcribed by Dr. Phil Curtis and Dr. Jennifer Abdulla:

After the destruction of most of the life forms on planet Earth 65 million years ago, the Gray aliens, who had fired the light beam which altered the path of the asteroid and sent it to Earth, killing many dinosaurs and most other mammals weighing over 50 pounds, decided to travel to this world to extract all the resources it held. They felt confident that no intelligent life was present.

However, a vast amount of time had passed from the date of the initial impact to the date the aliens again arrived in Earth's orbit. This had allowed Earth to recuperate from the impact and its repopulation by vegetation and animal life. A surviving group of bipedal Troodont dinosaurs, on the continent we know today as Australia, had become the top predators. Thus, when the aliens landed and began surveying to see what riches this new planet could provide for them, they were curious about these intelligent and social meat eaters.

At some point, the Grays decided to begin breeding and genetically altering these Troodont in hopes of creating a servant class of animal which they could use as labor. This was only done as an experiment at first, for the highly advanced Grays had no real need for servants. But the birth of the Dinosauroid was successful. Hundreds of years passed and the Dinosauroids created a society based on serving the religious and scientific needs of the aliens. They gained much intellect and science, which they began to employ in a struggle for freedom. Inevitably, war broke out and the Dinosauroids were almost destroyed. Though they knew it might be impossible to defeat the Grays, they kept on fighting. The aliens finally retreated, temporarily, after hundreds of years of war.

The technology of the Grays was vast and advanced and, as they returned in larger numbers to Earth after a war ended, they would once again conquer the Dinosauroids. In the end, the Grays were themselves almost wiped out by a virus which hardly affected the Dinosauroids at all. The remaining Grays put themselves into a time-lock.

The Dinosauroids, having stolen most of the Grays' technology, realized they could escape the Grays forever. Using the Grays' own forbidden technology, the time-lock, they shifted their entire society one second into the future.

Time in this parallel universe did not pass at the same rate as time in the universe they had escaped from. After a few hundred of their years had passed, the Dinosauroids one day received a signal that could only have come from the world they had escaped. Curious, they merged a portion of their world with the old world to investigate and, to their surprise, as they discovered

that sixty million years had passed, they faced the human civilization of Mahoud.

The humans, awed by the nature of the Dinosauroids, looked upon them almost as gods. The isolated peoples of Mahoud had developed technologies far more advanced than the remainder of Earth's inhabitants and what they learned from the Dinosauroids greatly enhanced their science. At about that time, and due to the contact with the Dinosauroids, the peoples of Mahoud sought sanctuary from the world. It was only because of the ring of mountains on all sides, save for the single passage to the continent, that the society of Mahoud had remained unaltered by the primitive humans massing on Earth.

Many discoveries made by modern humans after the disappearance of Mahoud, such as the Antikythera, a solar system clock-like device discovered under water, were considered built in the time of Archimedes. This technology was actually the theft of existing inventions from the time of Mahoud, or Atlantis, as it became known. Archimedes lived on the south coast of Italy where the story of Atlantis originated, and where Mahoud would have been found. The Antikythera, which was the central cog that drove the robotic guards, was developed to protect the city peoples from the remainder of the world. These robots, or primitive versions of Taskers, were in fact powered by radioactive particles and were also used to power and drive the death rays spoken of in mythology. All was developed on the Dinosauroid technologies that they had originally learned from the Grays.

Deep in the language of the Dinosauroids was discovered the term 'Shang Lie' or 'Shangri-La' as pronounced by the humans, and this was the direct link to the mythical city of the Dinosauroid world. The great library of Alexandria, eventually burned to the ground, had held the story of Atlantis and its machines, recovered from Dinosauroid histories. Now much of Earth's previously unknown history was translated from Dinosauroid chronicles, similar to the way knowledge, in the works of Arabic philosophers, had been rediscovered during the Renaissance which followed the dark ages.

Chapter 21 Discovery in Somalia

Mark Dixon spoke to the students in his third-year university class. "About one million years ago, the First Ones, the escaped creations of the Grays' initial experiments, begin building an empire in present day Egypt, Britain and Somalia. Their structures were, according to the Dinosauroids, magnificent and more advanced than any of us today could imagine. But they were, of course, long ago ground under relentless ice ages."

Mark, with his companions of old, Andy Kent and Mickey Petrov, were pioneers in a recent educational development. With the discovery of the buried complex under Stonehenge, anthropology had expanded into a whole new discipline.

This live version of anthropology dealt with the latest discoveries of humanity's history and remains. The interactions with the Dinosauroids meant that scientists no longer had to guess at the past, for the true answers were found in the Dinosauroids' records.

Mark continued. "But not all the creations of the First Ones were destroyed. They built three mammoth structures, one in Egypt, buried deep beneath the Sphinx and the shifting sands of time. Another was built in Britain, buried over time, then rediscovered under Stonehenge. The last is still safely buried under the city of Dhuusamareeb, Somalia."

"The First Ones aren't still living there, are they?" one of the students asked.

"Well, yes and no," Mark said, with a smile. "Once the cities were fully functional, the First Ones became pure mind and shed their bodies. The three underground cities were used to store the discarded bodies, while their minds ranged freely through space."

The student blinked but remained silent.

"It was at this time," Mark said, "that the First Ones took the name of Enoch, the ancient word for 'people of one planet' and adopted a hands-off policy for primitive humanity, which continued evolving without influence for almost a million years."

Mark glanced down at his notes. "Then someone decided to write about Enoch. The way the story went was that this being, who had walked with a god for three hundred and sixty-five years, finally was no more, for the god took him away."

"That sounds like it came from the Bible," another student said.

"I believe it did," Mark replied. "One particular individual of the entity which called itself Enoch decided to reject the terms of non-interference imposed by the others of its kind, and willingly interacted with human descendants at a time of great tribulation."

The students leaned forward.

"Apparently, a god appeared to humanity and created much chaos," Mark said. "This god was destructive and unstoppable, a vengeful and spiteful presence bent on dominating and oppressing humanity. To the writers of this early time period, the Enoch eventually became known as angels, intermediaries between the vengeful god and the simple humans."

Mark went on. "We have also learned that these Enoch are not helping humanity out of goodness. Rather, their goal is to deter this destructive god from discovering their great underground structures and the bodies they left there." He paused. "Those structures represent peace and safety to the Enoch, a place of retreat where they can escape the lesser beings of the world."

"That concludes my introduction," Mark said. "Today we have two guest lecturers, Dr. Andy Kent and Dr. Phil Curtis. Both men have been studying the British complex we now know as the

ancestral home of the Enoch. Phil, over to you."

Phil began his lecture. "Good day, students. Dr. Kent will later describe the rationale behind the British complex. I will start by addressing our interactions with the Dinosauroids, and what we have learned from them."

It had been nearly a year since the migration of the Dinosauroids from the time-lock found in the British complex to their resettlement on the continent of Australia. This repopulation was not without its critics. Many humans felt that giving Australia to the Dinosauroids was unjust but, with the population of Earth so low, there was plenty of land to go around.

"These living fossils from Earth's past are quite amazing. Once we had worked out a common mathematical language, we quickly discovered the limitless intellect these beings possess. It wasn't long after we established a working language that the first of many Dinosauroids, or as they prefer to call themselves, Reptoids, began using our English language to communicate."

Phil shuffled a few papers on the desk and started a slide show portraying the scientists working with the first few Dinosauroids. "We were somewhat surprised that these amazing creatures wanted to be referred to as Reptoids, using the combination of reptile and hominid. Scientists have always considered the Dinosauroids as non-reptile, but we were certainly willing to accommodate these new entities on Earth."

Phil had flipped through a few slides, which hung three-dimensionally in the air above and behind him as he lectured, depicting the evolution from dinosaurs to Reptoids. "We had long established through the fossil record that the ancestral form of the Reptoids, known as Troodonts, had a large enough skull cavity to accommodate quite a substantial brain, suggesting a good potential for intelligence."

As the slides clicked past, an outline of the full evolutionary scale, from primitive to intelligent, emerged. "Their hierarchical tribal structure determines their leadership," Phil continued. "This understanding made it easy for us to establish a program for the reintegration of these life forms back into their ancestral homeland of Australia."

"With regard to their discovery in the complex under Stonehenge," Phil went on, "we can only surmise that at some point, the Enoch must have placed them there. This suggests that the Enoch have an understanding of advanced technology."

The term 'Enoch' had been deciphered from the graphical depictions on the walls of the British complex in the form of movable pictures. This term did not go unnoticed by the minimal religious community which still existed on the fringes of modern civilization.

All of science had become the free exchange of enlightened ideas, free from the dogma and hypocrisy of world religions of the past. But one of the questions that was asked of Dr. Curtis came from the Open University link that several distance students used.

A young male face on the video monitor spoke. "Hi, my name is Mustafa, and I am a distance student in Uganda. My question is, Enoch is referred to in historical and religious texts from the past. Are these one and the same?"

"Yes, this does appear to be the case," replied Dr. Curtis.

"Then is it not correct to reason that the religious texts of the past represent the truth, and that we as a people have strayed from the righteous path laid out by our creator?" Mustafa asked.

"You might be correct if it had not been for the fact that every religion of the past rejected the writings about Enoch," Phil responded coolly. "Only a few sentences were ever used and then were dismissed. If the religious community of the past was so sure of its facts, then why, when shown their blunder, did they reject the one answer that works?"

He had grown used to being asked this question at every lecture. It seemed the remnants of a false doctrine had persisted in surviving because the adherents desired to degrade humankind's achievements once again.

Mustafa said, "But can we not now agree that our ancestors were wrong to reject the Enoch and accept this new knowledge? And that by embracing our forefathers' mistakes and worshipping the Enoch, we can redeem ourselves in our creator's eyes?"

"If you wish to return to the old ways of burying your head in the sand and begging for forgiveness, please feel free to do so. But don't try to suggest that yours is a desirable path for humanity to take. In the past, religion repeatedly proved itself to be a destructive force." Phil's tone was stern and without remorse. "These beings we know as the Enoch deliberately hid the time-lock device and the existence of the Dinosauroids from the people of Earth and this speaks volumes regarding the influence of truth."

Several other questions were addressed by Phil before he turned the podium over to Dr. Kent.

"Hi, you can just call me Andy. I am one of the lead scientists in charge of the British complex site once occupied by the Enoch, and I have been there since the site was first discovered. Your professor, Mark, and I go a long way back, to when we both were grad students together. My job at the site is to decipher some of the tools and instruments we discovered there, along with the imagery found on the complex walls."

Andy showed slides of the dig site on the three-dimensional projector and stopped at one in particular. "You see here an image of the columns at our complex. At first, we were all perplexed as to their meaning, then a fellow scientist had an idea. Before the war, she had found an old site map from a place known as Gobekli Tepe, in what was then Turkey." Andy overlaid the two images together, showing how the pillars found at the British site and the site in Turkey aligned perfectly.

"We now believe that the Enoch had some influence on the humans that built the Gobekli Tepe site, and that this site was later recorded in history as a colony of Atlantis." This caught the imagination of several students but, unwilling to accept interruption, Andy pressed on in his lecture. "As near as we can now tell, these Enoch have been referred to several times in human writings, most notably as angels. It is our conclusion that humanity has been influenced or interfered with by these beings over time, therefore proving beyond any doubt that we are not alone in the universe."

Andy clicked a few more slides. "We have no understanding, as yet, of the origin of these Enoch, but we are sure that they were responsible for placing the time-lock device within the complex walls."

Andy flipped to a world map of Earth. "A new discovery has everyone at the complex excited. We have been told that two more sites exist, one in Egypt and the other in Africa. We have teams of scientists scouring the two suspected locations, looking for any clues that might lead to a new discovery." He went on to explain the discoveries of importance at the British site and the relevance of the geothermal style power grid the Enoch had used to support their grand complex.

"I will now display images of the bodies of the Enoch we have since discovered. Please show proper respect here and don't ask questions." Andy clicked a few controls and many thousands of human bodies in a state of limbo appeared on the projector, all held in teardrop-like modules suspended from the ceilings of several immense rooms. "The bodies are alive, though all biological functions have ceased. We do not fully understand this process, but the theory is

that these are vessels for the minds of the Enoch. According to their writings from almost a million years back, these Enoch discovered a technology we can't even begin to fathom. With this technology, the bodies are held safe, and the mind is allowed to exist forever and to wander as a type of hard light."

The students looked awestruck but remained silent, so Andy continued. "We really have no idea how the Enoch create this hard light, but the best comparison we can offer is our own hologram projections."

Andy's images clearly showed the human beings called Enoch doing tasks of such a complex nature as to be almost magical. The records these beings had left behind told of an amazing period in Earth's history.

When the lecture ended and all the students' questions had been addressed, Mark, Andy and Phil decided to have supper together at the local university haunt and catch up on each other's lives. After supper, the three friends made their way to the local pub for several pints of beer. This finally got Mark talking. "You have it lucky. I'm stuck lecturing classes while you two run off and play explorer!" The beers were obviously taking hold, as Mark slurred his words.

Andy laughed. His old buddy had never been able to hold his liquor.

Phil chugged down his ale. "That may be true, Mark, but a stable life with a nine-to-five job is still what I hope for someday."

The three drank long into the night and then staggered across campus to their respective dorms to sleep off the evening's excesses. By midday they had recovered sufficiently to gather in the cafeteria for strong liquid stimulants. "Looks like I have to pull the plug on our visit, guys," Andy said, as he held his head and leaned over a steaming hot cup of tea. "Got a message last night from the Somalia dig site. Seems they found the opening. I'm catching the first shuttle out in less than an hour."

Though they hated to break up the visit so soon, the three friends promised to reconnect soon and, within three hours, Andy was standing with the dig site team leader in what was left of Somalia in Africa. The entrance to the underground complex here made the entrance in Britain look like a hatch by comparison. Andy thought this must be the primary site, for the grand and enormous design dwarfed the British site.

Knowledge of how the British site worked meant there was no need to break through the door by force to gain entrance. It was a simple matter of selecting the right frequency and, like Aladdin's magic cave, the entrance materialized before the astonished team. The entire complex began breathing itself back to life, the sounds of distant machines surging into operation, providing lights and heat to welcome the team.

The interior of this site was radically different from the British site, too. Instead of solid walls of smooth composite materials, with grand hallways and movable three-dimensional photos, here they walked into a forest.

Trees, rising skyward to magnificent heights, were such a deep green as to be nearly black in hue. It looked as if the makers of this place had built an unbelievably large shell over what was then the surface of the planet, encapsulating a green and growing ancient forest, with life forms nearly a million years old. As the machines that controlled this complex became operational again, so too did the life forms held in its interior. In full biohazard suits, the team led by Andy took their first tentative steps into history and walked the surface of the planet as it had existed long ago.

Never let it be said that scientists are not human, for as the team walked through ancient forests and open savanna, upon ground almost a million years old and still as fresh as the day it

first existed, excitement and conversation boiled up like lava from a volcano. Like children on Christmas morning, the members of the team were nearly blind to any dangers that might lie within these walls. And there were dangers. They nearly stumbled over a saber-tooth cat feasting on an elephant calf. Both parties backed away from one another, the cat snarling, the scientists torn between running away and trying for a closer look.

This was humanity's first introduction to a rare, almost unknown, and even less understood element on the periodic table. The element was considered to be a member of the noble gas family but was so dense at the molecular level that it embodied and encompassed the entire dome structure like a metal shield.

The team that walked the ancient forest floor and through the tall, waving grasses on the savanna found animals from a time long past in Earth's memory, scurrying about and busying themselves with their daily tasks, not at all bothered by the humans invading their home.

So caught up were the humans in the excitement of this new find that no one even felt so much as a shiver from the ground. But the entire complex was lifting itself back to the surface of the world. Like a massive elevator, the complex rose skyward, returning to the light of the sun that had once graced this ancient place. The small, war-ravaged, deserted village that existed above it disintegrated and crumbled out of the way of the rising dome. The mud brick buildings began to break up into sand and mud as the vibrations destroyed what was left of the village and the ground slowly gave way to the rising complex from below.

The shell of the complex began to deteriorate, the noble gas changing to a lesser state on the periodic table and fading away. The first rays of sunlight caused many good scientists to lose their stable condition of logic and shed a tear at the beauty they now beheld. Three hundred miles across, and fully functional, adaptable to the conditions of present-day Earth, a mighty gift from the Enoch resurfaced to grace a war-torn world. It was a world barely recognizable after the chaos of war with the descendants of the people of the once mighty and ancient country of Mahoud.

As if that incredible act was not enough, two other domes some sixty miles distant also resurfaced, giving a new home and renewed hope to what would eventually be thousands of human caretakers.

"I have no words," Andy muttered as he slowly removed his protective headgear to inhale the smells of this incredible place. "To think a technology of such immeasurable depth once existed." He fell silent then, and it was nearly two full days before he could even begin again to communicate. The news of this discovery made its way around the globe in a heartbeat, however, and people who had suffered much stood for a moment in silence, unable to find a way to give thanks to a populace they now knew as distant family.



"I'm telling you, we found a circle in the third risen forest complex that matches the description found in the British site!" shouted an excited young researcher. The roar of the transport craft that Andy was preparing to board made it difficult to communicate.

"That's impossible," Andy shouted back, sure the researcher had made some sort of mistake.

"There is no mistake. We checked the figures twice and ran the math through our computers several times. We are looking for the entrance to the Egyptian site in the wrong location!" The young researcher tugged on Andy's sleeve, trying to stop him from leaving.

Frustrated, Andy motioned for the transport to lift off without him as he gathered up his

belongings and walked back down the ramp to the building below. This was the research lab constructed just outside the now protected forest and grassland area. Here the researchers were able to work without contaminating the three sites.

Teams had been searching the Egyptian desert for almost a year, with no success in finding the third site's entrance. This young researcher claiming to find a circle in one of the roughly documented ancient forests defied logic.

"Here, on this map, we found the stone rings here," the young researcher said as he pointed to a location on a map laid across the table the researchers used for eating lunch.

"And you're sure of this? Because my missing the committee's monthly meeting will surely get me fired." Andy wanted to emphasize his predicament.

"Positive! We have a skidder parked outside, and we can be at the circle in a little over an hour if we leave now." The young researcher was bubbling with confidence.

The road through the ancient forest to the circle was cut carefully, with many twists and turns to protect a great many sensitive areas. However, after a little more than an hour, the two men stood at the parking area a short walk from the circle's location.

"Lucy, the lead scientist, is waiting for us at the circle. She has the entire area restricted and sectioned off," the young researcher said, as the two walked with bags of heavy gear slung over their backs.

"Not Lucky Lucy?" Andy asked. He could barely stand being in that woman's presence. To Andy, Lucy was a dilettante, a rich kid from an arrogant family. How she had ever earned a degree was a mystery.

"One and the same," the researcher replied and then ducked as Andy started to rant.

The two men emerged from the forest and stood in a small clearing as Andy continued to vent. "Then she claimed to have found a vital clue to the location of the power source for the British site when, in fact, she had located the kitchen facility. The damn power source entrance was two levels down. I doubt Lucy even knows the difference between a circle and a square!" Andy was feeling frustrated and sure this trip was a waste of time and that by missing the committee meeting he was surely going to lose his job.

Lucy had walked into the clearing behind the two men and heard the entire conversation. "To be fair," she said coolly, "the only reason I missed the entrance was because your team had confused meters with feet again." She was a big woman, well over six feet in height and had fiery red hair that looked like she rarely combed it. "Back here is where I found the circle." She motioned for the two men to follow as she returned to the forested area.

There, after a moment's walk, Andy stood staring in disbelief at a stone circle. The circle was approximately two feet across and consisted of six or seven fist sized rocks buried haphazardly in the dirt.

"You, I am going to have fired!" Andy growled at the young researcher, "and you, I am going to kill!" Andy turned a furious gaze on Lucy.

Lucy calmly pointed just beyond the small stone circle. There in the brush, barely visible, stood a full stone replica of Stonehenge. Time and vegetation had taken their toll on the stones, but they were still legible, and inscribed on the face of each rock was the ancient writings of the Enoch.

"It's on the small stones, near the center, that I found the correct location of the Egyptian entrance," Lucy added smugly.

Andy stood dumbstruck, trying to find a way to apologize and to reconcile the discovery of these immense stones. "Well, when I'm wrong, I'm really wrong," Andy offered as he scratched

the top of his head.

"I put the entrance about ten yards south of the team's present location. That's where it should be found," Lucy added.

Andy immediately grabbed his satellite communications device and relayed the news to the Egyptian dig team.

It didn't take long for the return message. Sure enough, the new location revealed the entrance.

Andy spent the better part of that day conversing with the seven scientists now excavating in the correct location in Egypt, as he studied in ever greater detail all the markings Lucy was pointing out on the stones she had discovered.

"I have to admit your work here is very impressive, and I have badly misjudged you." Andy said to Lucy.

Lucy ignored the compliment, instead focusing on revealing more markings in other areas she had discovered.

Suddenly, over the communications device, shouting and other sounds of chaos rang out from the Egyptian team. Andy asked the team what was happening and the reply he received was both frantic and jumbled. All he and Lucy could make out was, "Run..." and cursing mixed with the words, "some type of creature appeared!"

Then came horrific screams of pain, then a sharp crack, and the communications device went dead.

As if that were not enough, the three scientists standing in the ring of stones then witnessed a most remarkable event, one that would never be repeated.

Chapter 22 Terrorism

The entire event had been recorded by both satellites and nearby seismic sensors. Andy stared at his communicator in disbelief, trying to make sense of what he had just witnessed.

Lucy said, "My god, what the hell happened there?"

"I have no idea," Andy replied. The three stood in silence in the newly risen forest of the First Ones, and watched, astonished, as the replica of Stonehenge they had discovered glowed blue for a moment, then dimmed and faded away. The link with the fifth dimension was thus shattered and would never be rediscovered.

Several days of confusion followed. The knowledge that Charger had attacked scientists and innocent civilians at the dig in Egypt was intolerable. This beast who had appeared out of thin air and created a total disaster was something that must be dealt with. His attack served as an impetus to humanity's desire to have all the Hyborgs destroyed. General Harris hatched a scheme to have Charger himself remove all the Lycans and Hyborgs from existence, but he decided not to implement the plan until later.

Right now, humanity had a larger problem to deal with. The forest domes of the Enoch contained all the plants and animals a starving and dysfunctional world needed. As lead scientist in full command of the projects, Andy thought the domes needed a protector, and reluctantly decided that Lucy was the best qualified. Lucy and her grad students were given full authority for the protection of the forests and the use of the forest products in rejuvenating a war-ravaged world. They were enjoined to do so carefully.

What started as a gift from humanity's distant ancestors and arrived at Earth's hour of greatest need soon degraded into chaos and calamity. The largest problem was the location of the domes. The Enoch had had no way of knowing that Dhuusamareeb, Somalia, would one day turn out to be the worst location on Earth.

A country mired in brutal repressions and organized crime now held the best source of food for a starving population. The country's provisional government, formed after the war ended, claimed that they owned the domes, and they would only hand out the food and plants to those countries that had the capital to purchase them.

One man had the backbone to say no, to say that those who remained on Earth had to put their old hatreds aside and start working together. This voice who rallied the world and forced dissenters to step aside for the betterment of all the peoples of Earth, was Danny Opinhimmer. He was truly a president for a new world, a native American Indian kid from a small town who would destroy borders and, with the limited remaining population of Earth, create a single world government. Danny supported Lucy and her love for the great, ancient forests and confirmed that she was the protector of these remarkable oases of green. To appreciate the majesty of these forests with their exotic plants and ancient animals, one had only to look around at the remainder of the world.

The invasion had destroyed all but a few regions on planet Earth, and these were stretched to their limits to support the survivors, including those that returned from the frozen poles. The incredible goodwill of the Inuit of the north and the research scientists of the south saved the lives of countless humans, and now those survivors needed to recuperate and regain their strength. They naturally turned to the exotic, ancient tracts with their staggering beauty, rich grasslands, incredibly tall trees, and robust wildlife as a means to that end.

Only Lucy, who daily drove or walked through the forests and across the savannas of healthy, waving grasses, knew just how rich the areas were in life. She often glimpsed hedgehogs, skinks, and civet-like creatures on the prowl. Occasionally, a hartebeest, which looked like a precursor to the modern antelope, would raise its head above the grass and give her a long look from large, liquid, brown eyes. And, of course, where the hartebeest roamed, so did the red jackal, though it rarely let itself be seen. She sometimes glimpsed the enormous ears of African elephants browsing among the trees and heard the snarling roar of saber-tooth cats arguing over kills.

Snakes abounded, and Lucy was forever seeing new and different varieties, grateful that she felt no aversion to these reptiles. Larks, warblers, and bush shrikes flitted everywhere in search of insect meals.

Among the palms, she sometimes found shea trees and tasted their tart but nutritious fruit, as she marked their location on her charts. Their big, oil-rich seeds would be valuable both as food and medication. Acacia, or thorn trees, were everywhere and sometimes she came across a big baobab tree, indicating that this area had evolved from semi-desert, for the baobab stores water in its immense trunk against the dry seasons.

She could have wandered the clean, verdant areas all day, but her duties as protector were heavy. She was often heard complaining about the apparently constant need of survivors to consume everything in their path. This stupidity would destroy the gift of the Enoch. To secure and maintain an ecosystem three hundred miles across was difficult at best and, at worst, it was a vulnerable garden waiting to be raided. Outdated warlords, a remnant of the past and an ideological throwback to the Stone Age, were determined to control this once tribal area, intending to get rich no matter what the cost to other survivors in a devastated world.

Lucy was not about to let this happen, so she had massive walls erected around the forests to protect the gardens and the produce grown. Time and again the warlords, desperate to tear down the walls they felt did not belong on their tribal lands, encouraged people to commit acts of suicide. What Lucy could never make these people understand was that tribal lands no longer existed. People might still cling to the ideologies of times long past, but the traditions of property ownership had to take a back seat to survival.

A final act perpetrated by the local chiefs of Somalia led to the deaths of hundreds of simple, ancient, tribal people. They chose to tunnel under the wall. The damage to the ecosystem was devastating. Plants were torn from the ground and diesel fuel poured on the remaining plants, then ignited, forcing Lucy to act. She installed computerized gun batteries around the three domes. The guns automatically killed anything that got close without proper authorization.

"I just don't understand! We feed them with what we grow here in the same proportions as the rest of the world, and they still demand more! Are they insane? Do they not grasp the desperate conditions the world is facing?"

Lucy was beside herself with rage. She had just witnessed another young life taken by the guns. "That's the third kid this week. They will never get close but still they try! The stupidity of this whole situation is that these kids are not starving. Their remains prove they were well fed and healthy." She spoke from the head chair of the conference room located inside dome Alpha. Her colleagues sat in attendance, listening, and taking notes.

The three domes had been labeled Alpha, Beta, and Omega. It was Omega that had been burned badly during the last raid, and now the walls there were being constructed to go downward into the ground just as far as they went upward.

"Jane, what's the situation on Beta? Are the seedlings taking root in the soils of North

America?" Lucy asked after she finished her rant.

After the war that devastated Earth and after Danny had been elected to the presidency of the world, the planet had been divided into five districts. North and South America, Eurasia, Africa, and Outlands, which was basically any area not connected with the four big continents. Each district was run by a prime minister who reported to the president. All these places relied on the three domes for crop seeds to be planted in areas being recovered after the invasion, a most arduous task.

"We have had incredible success in reseeding the northern continent, but less success in the south," Jane replied. She was a short woman, but her personality gave the impression that she was as tall as Lucy, over six feet. "The armies in the north ensured a better survival of the soil, but the south was overrun so quickly that the soils there may take several years to recover."

When Jane finished, Lucy turned to her scribe and said, "Take a note. We have to redouble efforts on the Maven program if we hope to succeed in the South. I'm guessing the remaining districts are still on track?" Several people nodded their agreement, and soon the meeting adjourned.

The Maven program had been started by elite scientists working in various locations around the world, manipulating the DNA of bright students with the purpose of creating highly intelligent experts in particular fields, who would find new ways to reclaim the planet. The future for the Mavens looked promising.

But what Lucy and her colleagues thought was an inspirational step toward the betterment of all the people of this broken and devastated world would eventually falter and fail, for Danny, as president, had promised the world a revenge program. This program would use the vast intellect of the Mavens to modify and back engineer the technology the invaders had used against Earth. With this new knowledge, humanity could strike back at the aliens.

Elvin, Eve, and Nigel were three of the brightest new Mavens; though socially awkward, they were gifted at understanding any puzzle placed before them. Lucy would often go out of her way when touring the Beta site, where the three worked, to stop and chat, and the three kids found a friend in her. Lucy would create new ways of capturing the imaginations of Elvin and Eve, and these two lovers were fascinated by the knowledge of plant life Lucy would present in the form of forgotten books.

One day, on a site visit, Lucy was shocked at what Elvin showed her. He had managed to recreate an extinct orchid out of the material he recovered from the dome's plant life. "I think this is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen," Lucy said as she held the small flower up to the light that came through the lab windows.

"I'm glad you like it, because I made it especially for you," Elvin replied as Eve looked on with longing. She had hoped that she, too, could get such a compliment, but understood that this was not meant to be.

"May I keep it?" Lucy asked politely, to which Elvin replied, "Of course."

Nigel, not to be outdone by his teammate, had also recreated something thought to be long extinct. It was an unusual gift. "I have recreated a carnivorous plant. It took some effort, but I think it could be beneficial in controlling the insect populations now out of control in the south," Nigel said as he displayed his creation.

This caught the attention of some of the military personnel who, for purposes of observation, often accompanied Lucy on her rounds. The military presence was usually small and quiet. However, this day General Harris happened to be along for the tour.

"Isn't this the most remarkable thing you have ever seen?" Lucy asked him.

General Harris's eyes were fixed on Nigel. The general was indeed impressed, for the idea of recreating exotic life from little more than plant fibers had piqued his curiosity. He decided, right there and then, that some of these gifted kids would be drafted for the Revenge Program. It took some doing, but the general always got his way. Later, it was the work of Nigel and Eve that led to the Krill Shang program, a short-lived effort sabotaged by Elvin when the group realized what the general had planned.

The three Maven kids were joined by several other Mavens, sequestered away in a secret military compound, and set to work on an absolute abomination. The general had managed to smuggle several exotic animals out of the dome's enclosure, the most notable being a saber-tooth cat. Having succeeded at creating Hyborgs and Lycans, the general wanted an even more aggressive soldier for combat. The Krill Shang was meant to be a cross between the genetics of the heavy, muscular saber-tooth cat and a gorilla, then that success was to be grafted into humans. This atrocity of science was what drove the Mavens to vanish off the face of Earth. They wanted nothing to do with the general's plan, and their escape ensured this idea would never come to fruition.

Meanwhile, Lucy struggled with her own battles. She had had little success at stopping the tribal kids bent on killing themselves by attacking the dome's walls. "The only idea I can come up with, is that we take this fight straight to the top. I can no longer stand by and watch as innocent kids are sent to their deaths by some insane warlord!"

Lucy was once again facing the weekly boardroom meeting. On the wall behind her was a map representing the tribal colonies and their locations. Outlined in red were the locations of the warlords. "President Opinhimmer himself has authorized the use of deadly force to contain this problem and, as I understand it, he has dispatched several Hyborgs, who are due to arrive in the next few days. It will be up to us to devise a plan for negotiating with those affected after the attacks are launched. I suggest that everyone here go back to their departments and get organized." As Lucy spoke, the team leaders set to work, even while in the meeting, outlining and planning for a way to rescue the abused children.

Dhuusamareeb, Somalia, had been separate from the rest of the world for longer than recorded history. Civil unrest was commonplace in many parts of the world, but nowhere was it more vicious and sadistic than that fomented in the name of a god in Somalia.

But the warlords didn't know what hell was, until the elite team of Hyborgs, led by Charger and his Lycans, Mac and Jill, attacked them. The warlords honestly thought they stood a chance to win against the battle-hardened soldiers. The fear these ideological lunatics had felt when the aliens attacked was nothing in comparison to their terror of Charger's army. The Hyborgs never slowed, never rested, and never showed remorse or sympathy toward anyone foolish enough to resist them. Nor were they precision-guided weaponry. The Hyborgs slaughtered women and children as quickly as the men if they offered any resistance.

Rallying cries and praising their god met with no success. The attack caused many warlords to beg for mercy on hands and knees, then offer to surrender to the authorities, but there was no one for these guerrilla leaders to surrender to. The Hyborg offensive to track and slaughter every warlord took less than a week. The shock these supporters of faith-based terrorism expressed at being systematically exterminated like cockroaches went out on live television for the entire week. Then there was silence. What remained of most of the warlords were merely bloody smears on the ground and, for those not found, only the worst was suspected.

What Lucy and her team faced after the attacks was chaos. People who had survived the invasion were now seeing the Hyborgs as monsters, a menace to civil society. They were

described in the media as being no better than a pack of rabid dogs let loose on humans, the most shameful and disrespectful event ever perpetrated on war veterans.

Only one person had the audacity to try and defend the actions of these manmade creations. Pam was chief executive officer of the world news division and could express her opinions openly. She had decided that with so few reporters surviving after the invasion, she would host a weekly talk show to try and address the feelings survivors shared.

"So can you explain to the viewers what your concerns were with this military strike on the Somali warlords?" Pam asked Lucy as they sat across from one another during the televised interview.

"We had hoped, when we asked General Harris for some assistance in dealing with the warlords, that he would contain the problem without such violence," Lucy responded as she squirmed in the high-back leather chair in front of the cameras. She realized that her complaints about the attacks had triggered much debate and concern among the people of New Denver and the other surviving capital cities.

"So, you're saying that the response to the warlords was heavy-handed, even though you often complained bitterly about the exploitation of young children as weapons of war?" Pam asked as she leaned forward.

Lucy was never shy of expressing her point of view. "Yes, that is true. However, it does no good to slaughter innocent people when hunting for a few problem leaders."

"But wait," Pam interjected. "Your point here is that these so-called innocent people, who were deliberately hiding murderous warlords, were somehow not guilty of collusion? What were our soldiers supposed to do? Just ask those non-combatants politely to give up the warlords' positions?"

Lucy was calm; she had expected worse from Pam, a woman reputed to be brutal in debates. "It is true that I asked the military for help in dealing with the deaths of so many innocent children persuaded to detonate explosives at our walls in some political expression of contempt. It is equally true that the military responded to my request with such violence that relationships with the local people are even more difficult than before."

Lucy deflected Pam's attempt to interject and went on. "These people have been poisoned for so long by fanatics devoted to religious intolerance, that their so-called 'truth' has no relationship to the facts. It's nearly impossible to find any common ground from which to start a beneficial dialog." Lucy took a breath. "But we will never win the hearts and minds of an oppressed people with brutality and more oppression."

Pam had heard enough. "So, you would rather negotiate a peace than fight? How do you think that would have worked out for us, had we not taken the fight to the alien invaders? What exactly is the difference between life forms coming to our world to exterminate the human race, and these lunatic warlords bent on dominating and oppressing people because of some religious ideology? With a world of starving and scared survivors afraid that something else is out there waiting to strike at us, you would rather we offer warlords the opportunity to make our lives worse?"

Lucy was determined to make her point clear and tried to refocus the debate on the actions of the military. "Look, I am not suggesting that what we did to ensure our survival against a force from some distant world was wrong. It was a matter of survival. But these are fellow humans we're talking about. The fact that innocent children were being coerced into actions by warlords practicing a traditional way of life among a people which has existed for thousands of years is not for us to judge. I can only speak to the way in which the military went about

suppressing these people."

Pam calmly asked, "What would you have done differently? I mean, if you were in charge and had to deal with this problem, what would you have done?"

"Well, ah..." Lucy stuttered as she tried desperately to find a good answer. "I don't think I would have sent in these monsters. Have you heard about the few warlord bodies we have since recovered? Three of them were found in a ditch, soaked in urine. It is obvious these monsters urinated on the dead."

Pam had no mercy, "So you would have sent more humans into this situation, quite possibly to get killed. That's your idea of doing a better job? The 'monsters,' as you call them, were used by humans to kill humans who obviously deserved to die!"

Lucy's nerves were frazzled. She had hoped to show the world the horror of General Harris's military intervention, but she could not deny that the military actually had things well under control. To prevent further loss of human life, the military had sent in those forces necessary to win this battle, and that meant using its most potent soldier, Charger.

The debate ended without anyone acknowledging the fact that Charger and the others like him were also human, or at least had been, in the past. The survivors of Earth were now clearly defining a difference between the soldiers who had fought to save their lives and themselves. In other words, if you didn't look human, you couldn't be human.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Why did Charger attack the scientists working on the dig site in Egypt? The answer will make more sense later in the story, after I explain what led to his action. Let me just say that the Charger who attacked the Egyptian site was not the Charger I've been telling you about, but from far in the future.

Yes, he had learned how to travel through time.

Will you be able to do that? Oh yes, in time. Ha ha. Sorry, Reader, couldn't resist. When I explain what happened to Charger in that distant future, I'll tell you about other instances of his time travel, instances that have already happened in this story.

No, I won't forget. Promise!

What happened to the Mavens? They stole a cargo ship the invaders had used and traveled out into space. They wanted nothing to do with General Harris's plan.

Yes, I'm glad they escaped, too. I'll tell you their story later on, too.

Did Lucy save the forests? Yes, she continued as head of the dome project and, after several years of working under Andy's direction, she married him and had three children.

No, she and Andy stopped fighting once they had time to share their views and discovered they were on the same side.

Their older boy, Dave, and his younger brother, Bill, were always close as kids and later in life started a plumbing company. Their sister, Elizabeth, was a heartache, for at age nine, when she was with her mother in the gardens of the Alpha dome, she wandered off into the forest. Elizabeth was never found and, though the search went on for several years, her disappearance remained a mystery.

Chapter 23 Highjacking

The Revenge Program flared briefly, then fizzled out. When humanity got spaceships functioning and traveled to the home world of the so-called alien invaders to seek their revenge, they found no aliens.

Not a single one.

Instead, the hollow, black planet seemed to be a world of plants and animals, intact buildings and communication networks, and amazing technology. The invaders had apparently felt it necessary to use every single inhabitant they had for the destruction of Earth, as only non-human life forms remained. Of course, it would have been close to impossible to resupply the forces from their home planet across such great expanses of space.

Still, it had come as a shock to find the aliens' home world empty of life except for animals. No one knew what the aliens had called their home, but the beauty of the place had everyone soon agreeing to call it Neo Terra.

Seven billion people winnowed down to just a few million, along with the destruction of so much of Earth's surface, made living on Earth for some people seem like a punishment. As a result, many survivors made the long trip to the aliens' planet to start over. Even though it meant living underground, the shining cities of that world had a brightness and beauty that old Earth could not hope to compete with for hundreds of years yet.



An excited voice on the other end of the line said she should return to the office at once, as a news story was breaking. Annoyed that her time off was once more being breached, Pam made her way to the office building belonging to the world news media.

"Good, good, you're back!" her assistant, Sheila, said. "There is little time. Get to the prep room and I'll brief you; we air in ten minutes."

In the prep room, Sheila began explaining what had happened. "A lot of people witnessed the takeoff this afternoon. The ship seemed to hover for some time just above the city before it disappeared into the clouds."

Sheila and her helper applied make-up and combed Pam's hair. "The military says the ship was stolen by a group of young terrorists and that several military personnel were killed in the raid."

"This can't be good," Pam said as she fidgeted in her makeup chair. "Do we have any names?"

"Just one that I recognized. Your old friend, General Harris, has made a few comments," Sheila replied.

"God, that man makes my skin crawl!" Pam said flatly. "Which ship was it? I heard that we were several years away from a full launch of the new fleet, and that back engineering the alien crafts might push that date even further into the future."

"That's just it; the ship wasn't one of ours," Sheila replied. "It was that strange supply ship that the military captured a long time ago. You remember, the one that they said was programmed to always fly to the same planet and back," Sheila replied.

"The supply ship?" Pam said, with a puzzled look on her half-powdered face. "What good is

that old thing to terrorists? Sounds more like an escape plan to nowhere unless the terrorists want a holiday on some dead world. What's the name of the terrorist group?"

"The military won't say; just calls them terrorists," was Sheila's response.

"I don't think I like where this is going," Pam said. She did her best to report on the event that evening on the world news and several guest speakers appeared to offer their input, all of which amounted to very little.

Back in the prep room, she said to Sheila, "I hate those talking heads. They never contribute anything of any real importance. Tell somebody to get my car. I'm going to take a drive over to the base where the craft was stolen. Maybe I can kick the dirt around and find a few clues."

Pam spent some time at the military base being stonewalled before she felt frustrated enough to let her hunger get the better of her. Outside the gates of the base was a small diner, and she decided that was close enough for a bite to eat. While sitting with the locals and enjoying some clam chowder, Pam heard several people talking about what had happened.

"Excuse me, I don't mean to pry, but did I hear you say that you knew who had stolen the alien cargo ship?" Pam asked a clean-cut young man. He looked to be in his early thirties and was sitting with some male friends. He was well-spoken, and his friends seemed very intelligent.

"We have a good idea," the young man said. "We work on the guidance systems for the fleet we're building; those ships are going to be huge when completed. Each ship is assigned a group of technical advisers, special people known as Mavens that the military developed years back to aid us ordinary types with the difficult math and physics problems that turn up when we're back engineering alien ships." The young man took another sip of his ersatz coffee and continued, "These Mavens are smart, that is true, but, man, are they arrogant! My best guess is that the military created another Frankenstein, and this time the monster got the better of them."

The men at the table laughed. Another young man added, "This time the monster was one of those hippy types, one of those guys you see on history videos from the 1960s. He probably stabbed the guards in the eyes with deadly flowers." Their mocking laughs rang out again.

Another young man, enjoying the high school humor, said, "Wait. No, it was probably joints, like that movie we saw in school. Those reefers will make you go mad. Quite possibly they giggled the guards to death."

Pam sat quietly for a while listening to the comments from the young men, and reflecting that her son, Gerry, now twenty-one, hadn't indulged in that kind of stupid humor since he was fourteen or fifteen. Finally, she politely excused herself. She sat in her car, one of only a few operating in the world, which denoted her importance, and after a bit, phoned her husband. She asked him if he knew anything about the Mavens and he replied that he did not, which was odd, for he was a high-ranking general in the military. Pam flipped through the address book on her phone and, finding the number she wanted, she dialed.

"Pam, this is a treat, you calling me on my personal line. Am I in trouble or something?" the voice asked.

"No trouble, just wanted to talk to an old friend," Pam said.

"Ha! You do know that my wife always checks my phone calls. I am going to have some explaining to do tonight. Out with it! What do you need?"

"Hey, making you the world's president has changed you. I think I want my vote back." Pam laughed.

"Tough, you gave it; it's mine now," Danny replied, with a chuckle. Pam asked carefully about the Mavens that worked at the base and about the idea that they were responsible for the theft.

"I think that's a new record for you," Danny said. "What took you so long to get to the answer? That was like fifteen minutes or so. I think you might be getting old." He paused. "But all joking aside, you cannot run with the story. I can't protect you from the repercussions this would have if it goes public."

"That bad?" Pam questioned.

"Worse than you know. It's a huge setback for General Harris's plans. We are left with only a small amount of the resources we had, so now we might be in trouble," Danny said. "The last three destroyer class ships we launched a few weeks back will now have to double as troop transports, and you can only imagine how the crews are going to respond to being locked up in space with Hyborgs and Lycans."

"Can you at least tell me how many of these Maven kids were involved?" Pam asked.

"We think there might have been as many as fifty. We're still working our way through the data. Listen, I have another meeting to go to; I'll have to cut this short. It was good to hear from you again. Say hi to your man and stay safe."

That was the end of the conversation with Danny. Pam had her answer but could do nothing with it for now.

She went on sitting in her car. Her call to the president had left her with more questions than answers. Why would Danny say that releasing the information about the Mavens could somehow jeopardize her job or possibly her life? What was it about these kids that was so threatening? Anyway, how could the military be so slack as to allow a group of non-military young people to steal a cargo ship? The scrappy details she had so far collected added up to nothing.

A few weeks later, Pam rediscovered the file on the abducted alien freighter. She sent the information on to Danny, who lost it on his desk for months, but eventually sent it on to the military. There it again languished for a long time before resurfacing on the desk of General Harris.

A man never known for his subtlety, he demanded that forces be gathered, and retribution be exacted. "Not going to allow some pissant bunch of pussies steal government property and get away with it!" Harris yelled at President Danny over the phone. "I'm ordering a scout ship be sent out ASAP. I intend to get to the bottom of this now!"

Danny, sitting in his office, pulled the phone away from his ear to ensure he would not go deaf from the ranting. "Let it go for now," he said, when Harris simmered down. "With all the other building we're doing; we simply can't spare the resources to send a scout ship after a dumpy old supply ship."

"If you say so," General Harris grumbled. "But I won't forget."

Chapter 24 Hanna says goodbye

By the end of the twentieth century, the Out-of-Africa theory, which proposed that human beings evolved in Africa and migrated out in multiple waves, had progressed from an obscure idea to fact. This was the justification used by American presidents after World War II for the military's space program designed to find and colonize any habitable planet human technology could reach. Like those primitives of old, the humans of the late twentieth century felt it desirable to migrate from Earth to the stars.

Early in the twenty-first century, astronomers peering through their telescopes discovered a star that harbored a small habitable planet. The planet was dubbed GHQ179, though the news of this discovery was never released to the public.

Within six months of confirming the viability of GHQ179, the nuclear-powered Earth ship USS Rothschild loaded its crew of 300 highly trained combatnauts aboard and, in 2025, began the eighty-year journey.

Earth was invaded only five years later, when returning was all but impossible for the Rothschild, and the ship had at first maintained communications with the dying world. It was decided that the first task of the new provisional government to be formed when they landed would be to ensure that, should the Earth fall, these survivors on GHQ179 would be trained and prepared to one day return and retake the Earth.

Like a message in a bottle, they became survivors set adrift, regarding themselves as mankind's last children. It was decided, for security reasons, that communication with planet Earth should be suspended.

After some thirty years of recovery from the invasion, Earth's government decided to send the ship Loki, much more advanced in technology than the Rothschild, to find and reconnect with the lost group of humans who had set out back in 2025.



Gin always hated visiting her mother, a difficult and disciplined woman. Gin often felt inadequate when she compared her own life with what her mother had achieved and, as a result, much preferred the company of her father. Gin's mother, the great Hanna Massey, one of Earth's four famous heroes, had been responsible for stopping the invasion of Earth by destroying the alien command ship in orbit.

Why Mitch, Gin's father, had ever married Hanna remained a mystery. Her father was such a kind man, and so good-natured, unlike her mother, who was hard and unyielding. And Hanna's discipline extended everywhere. Her home was always a masterpiece of cleanliness and order. Her front yard was row upon row of precisely ordered flowers, each particular color in a separate row. Her short hair was combed with military precision though the blonde color had now faded to sandy gray.

"It's fine. We won't be staying more than a few days," Dan said to Gin. Dan was a good man, well liked at work and in the community. He was of African origin, and most people were curious about how he had survived the chaos, for Africa was one of the first countries to fall to the invaders. The slaughter Africa faced in those early days of the invasion was unimaginable; almost everyone died.

"Remember, your mother means well, and she really is good to Reanna, so behave yourself." Dan smiled as he guided their young daughter past all the flowers, trying to make sure she didn't pick any along the way. Hanna stood in the doorway of the house, watching as her daughter and family walked up the pathway toward her. When Reanna caught sight of her grandmother, she bolted headlong, squealing with excitement, into Hanna's arms.

Hanna bent down and scooped up her granddaughter, then remarked to Gin, "I think you're letting my little girl grow up too fast," as if Gin was somehow responsible.

Their lunch together as a family was unremarkable; conversation revolved around work. After the table was cleared and Dan took Reanna outside to play, Hanna had time to speak with her daughter.

"I understand that you're taking my granddaughter and your husband on the Loki mission?"

Gin was a bit surprised that her mother was already aware of this mission to deep space, and asked, "How did you know?"

"Not difficult. One of the ways I benefit from being an integral part of rescuing a planet is that I've made a lot of friends. Friends with lots of contacts. I've known of your involvement with this program for the last two years."

"But I was only offered the contract a little over a year ago." Gin was puzzled.

"I guess that's true," Hanna replied.

"So, I'm betting that you had something to do with my being offered the contract?" Gin asked, with a slight agitation in her voice. She had never liked her mother meddling in her life, and here it was again.

"Gin, I know we often don't get along, but I have always been proud of the woman you are." Hanna's words now betrayed only a trace of her German accent. "We both know that, of the three hundred candidates, you were the most qualified." Hanna busied herself with tidying up her kitchen as she prepared coffee, obviously not wanting to betray any emotion, especially sorrow, to her daughter.

"You do realize this is a one-way mission?" Gin asked as she accepted a cup of coffee.

The two women sat together at the small kitchen table and spoke at length of what lay ahead. "It is true that I will miss my grandchild," Hanna said, with sadness. "It is equally true that I will miss you."

Gin was shocked. Her mother had never spoken like this in her entire lifetime. The remainder of the visit now seemed to pass too quickly, for Gin had suddenly realized that this was truly good-bye, and she would never see her mother again.

Three weeks passed, and five families prepared to board the transport to the Earth ship Loki. Hanna stood rigid in the crowd of well-wishers. She did not approach her children, but just stood looking stern, like the Sergeant she had once been. Gin, mellowed by the knowledge that, after all, her mother did care for her, turned, and blew her a kiss, and little Reanna waved, before they disappeared inside the transport.



Some two months later, Hanna was working in her small garden, as she did almost every day. She lived alone, for her marriage to Mitch hadn't lasted long; they were simply too different. Hanna didn't mind living by herself, but she now had to live with a companion, the sadness she felt because she would never see Gin and little Reanna again.

The teleprompt rang and told her it was a call from the district enforcement agency. When

she answered, the screen showed a thin, uniformed man, who asked her if she could spare the time to come down to the enforcement camp for a few moments. Hanna said she could be there in a few hours. The man calling seemed very pleased with this and promised to be there when she arrived.

As promised, Hanna arrived at the enforcement office after a couple of hours and met with the thin man, who introduced himself as Constable Smyth. "A prisoner has asked to see you, ma'am. We have the beast locked up good and tight," Smyth said. He guided Hanna down several white gleaming halls to the lockup area. "It nearly destroyed three of my men to get it under control, but fortunately they will live." Hanna was puzzled, still having no idea why she'd been called. "Good thing they had on body armor, or it might have been curtains for all three," Smyth said.

Entering the lock-up room, Hanna was astonished to find herself face to face with an old enemy. How had it come to be that Mac was separated from Charger and locked up? Her eyes widened, then narrowed to intensity, for she had promised to be there when Mac drew his last breath, to get even with him for the torture he had inflicted on Jill. This, she thought, was the opportunity of a lifetime. This was her chance for revenge.

"Can he be released into my care?" asked Hanna, with an edge to her voice. Mac turned slowly in the cage to face her.

"I can see no reason for not allowing this, ma'am," Smyth replied. "I can have the papers drawn up right away, but are you sure this is the right thing to do? He is very dangerous."

"Most definitely!" Hanna grinned at Mac.

Mac growled, low and threatening. Slowly, she walked up to the dividing field, and with a voice full of malice, whispered to Mac, "Tomorrow you die. Today you will suffer."

"We will have the animal brought to the front office, ma'am, but first you will need to sign off on custody of it," Smyth said, as he began to lead Hanna back to the front area. Hanna nodded and followed along, brushing her graying hair back from her face. After about an hour, the heavily restrained and sedated Lycan was waiting just outside the office to be loaded into Hanna's transport.

"Please, ma'am, can you tell me why this thing asked for you to come to its rescue here in State?" Constable Smyth asked.

"I know this beast from the war. I guess it could think of no one but me to call, but who is to know the mind of such an animal?" Hanna replied calmly and smiled.

Hanna drove along the shoreline of the ocean with her windows rolled down, enjoying the sea spray from the water for several miles, while Mac sat delirious in the back of the transport. She wanted him to be fully recovered from the sedation before she sought her revenge for the trauma he had inflicted on Jill over many long years.

When, for a brief time, Jill and Hanna had been bonded by the technological mental link, Hanna experienced Jill's entire life's experiences and ever since had carried that memory burned deep in her mind. It seemed as if Jill's experiences had become part of her.

She spoke in German to the dazed and snarling Mac in the back of the transport. "I do not know what providence has delivered you into my hands, but I did promise you I would someday kill you."

Mac was slowly regaining his composure, and started thrashing about in the back, trying to break the restraints.

"Relax. I will be releasing you very soon and we can finish this," snapped Hanna, her German accent growing thicker with emotion.

Mac had long lost the ability to speak readily, for, being mentally linked to Charger and Jill, there was never a need to talk. This day however was the exception. Mac managed to grunt out a comment that turned Hanna's face red with anger. "I've killed many. I will kill many more!" growled Mac as he fought the restraints.

"Not after today, Jew," retorted Hanna as she swerved the transport into a small cove that led to a private beach. Hanna stepped out and retrieved a heavy black bag from the back of the transport. She opened it, pulled out her body armor and began placing pieces of it on her body, taking her time to ensure that Mac would be fully conscious of the fight ahead. "She was a virgin, you bastard, you took an innocent girl and twisted her for your pleasure. I will enjoy killing you."

Mac thrashed wildly in the back of the transport, as what appeared to be fear began creeping into his eyes. Hanna, fully geared, walked slowly to the transport door, which shuddered as Mac threw himself wildly about. She reached out and lifted the handle, and as she did, Mac slammed with full force into the door, sending it flying open and knocking Hanna hard in the chest, dropping her to the ground.

Mac, still fully restrained, bolted from the compartment, and began running up the embankment to escape from Hanna.

Slowly Hanna stood up and reached for her weapon. She fired a single shot into one of Mac's heels, sending him crashing into the dirt and rolling back down the embankment toward Hanna. "It has only just begun," said Hanna softly.

Mac lay motionless as Hanna approached. She pulled a knife from her boot and cut the restraints that held him firm, then backed away. Mac stretched his limbs for a moment and growled. Hanna tossed the knife to Mac and began removing her weapon.

Mac ignored it. He needed no knife to tear apart a human. He began preparing himself for the task of killing Hanna.

"Fool, you should have taken the knife," sneered Hanna. With incredible swiftness, due in part to the biomechanical body armor she wore, Hanna closed the gap on Mac and, with a brilliant kick and several punches, broke some of his ribs and sent teeth flying.

Mac tried desperately to defend himself, but Hanna seemed to be everywhere. He would lash out in one direction, only to find Hanna was now behind him.

It was indeed a feat to kill a Lycan. Very few had died in the wars, but they were not invincible, and Mac was older now. He managed to connect for a moment with Hanna, grabbing her by the arm but, before he could do any damage, she got loose by breaking his hand. Mac let out a howl of pain.

"Good, good, that's for the boy Jill liked, the one you killed," snapped Hanna. She stepped back only a moment, then lunged forward. "This is for the other kids you murdered." She sent a brutal uppercut hard into Mac's chin, sending a few more teeth flying to the ground.

Then she struck downward with devastating impact, hard into Mac's ear. The sight of flesh being ripped from his skull was sickening. Blood sprayed into Hanna's eyes, sending her backward for a moment to clear them.

Mac took full advantage of the opportunity. As Hanna cleared her eyes, Mac lurched forward and grabbed her by the throat. He was squeezing the breath out of her, but Hanna reached down to a button on her belt. Activated, it sent a huge current of electricity into Mac, shocking him so badly that smoke rose from his fur.

"Bet you never expected that, you prick!" Hanna yelled at the twitching Mac on the ground. She spat, then kicked him hard in the ribs, breaking a couple more. She staggered back against a

rock to catch her breath as Mac groaned in pain. After another few moments, Hanna walked forward and grabbed Mac by his mane and, pulling hard on the hair, she activated a biomechanical implant that momentarily increased her strength. She hoisted Mac from the ground like a rag doll and hammered hard into his stomach and face with a series of punches, all the while yelling, "She was a kid, a virgin, you bastard, she never had a chance, you tortured her for god knows how many years."

In disgust, Hanna threw him hard into the rocks and he crumpled to the ground. The battle suit she wore was standard military issue, left over from the war, and Hanna was indestructible, or so it seemed.

But it took only a second of inattention, just a second of her not watching where she stepped. Possibly it was the tears flowing from her eyes that made her footing fail, or the thoughts of the awful torment that she felt from Jill's memories. But she tripped and fell to the ground. She tried to control her descent, but the ground hit her hard, knocking the breath from her lungs.

Then Mac was on her back, ripping at her suit with dedicated insanity. Hanna made it to her feet after some struggling, and pressed a button on her wrist that activated a stimulation pack in the arm of her suit. Suddenly she felt a huge burst of strength and the pain was gone. A quick twist and Mac was firmly in her grasp. She pulled Mac's arm from its socket and kicked hard, shifting Mac's kneecap to the side, and breaking his leg. Screaming like a wild animal, Hanna lashed out, striking Mac over and over, until her mind was a blur.

But Mac had won. In the moment he spent on Hanna's back, he had managed to shear off the back of her skull. Hanna's brains were slowly spilling out, killing her. She fell to her knees, stunned and unable to move. Her eyes blurring, she stared at Mac as he rose from the ground and approached her.

"German bitch," Mac grunted softly in her ear. Hanna's eyes rolled back, and it was over. Her body was later retrieved, but the killer was never discovered.

Chapter 25 Forty years postwar

The years rolled by, but the three grad students, Mark, Andy, and Mickey, who had obtained their doctorates in science and helped Earth in countless ways, still met often in their old hangout, the Bat Cave, to argue and gossip. Now in their seventies, they were nearing the end of their working careers. This day in early 2073, Mark, thin as ever and a little stooped now, wandered in to find Andy debating vigorously with Mickey.

"Milk, the simple creation of water and fat, provided by women!" Andy shouted. "If women did not give milk to male babies, then males would not exist. God creates man, Adam then creates Eve from a rib. She is the last thing created, and yet is the most important thing for the survival of man. What kind of logic is that?"

"Milk has nothing to do with it!" Mickey responded, still as vigorous as when his wild hair had been red, not the sandy gray it had become. "Evolution played no part in the development of mammals giving milk to their young. I tell you again, the aliens that intervened at the genesis of our time here on Earth needed to design us so that women give milk to their young. Otherwise, we would obviously stand out among the mammals of Earth. No, the aliens were clever enough to design us like mammals so that we would never figure out we are actually aliens."

Both men stopped shouting and turned their attention to Mark. He blew out a long breath of air and said, "God did it!"

"That's just nuts," exclaimed Andy. "Why would God create a perfect being like Adam, superior to the angels and yet have him be so dependent on woman, the one thing most hated and reviled in scripture?"

"God did it," repeated Mark. His mind was too taken up with other news to be interested in the argument.

"Evolution created milk so that women, when they give birth, can feed their young. That is not divine, but evidence for the process of evolution," Andy said.

Mark stared at Mickey, then at Andy, and said, "I told you, God did it." Then he shook his head. "Ah guys, I can't do this today, something bad has happened."

He knew that would get the attention of both men. He rarely described anything as 'bad,' and the use of that word meant he was serious. "Remember a story from a number of years back, the one about a girl who was part of the team that destroyed the alien mother ship in orbit?"

Andy and Mickey both looked puzzled.

"The girl was German, her name was Lieutenant Hanna Massey, and she was murdered around eight years back."

"Yeah, now I remember. She was one of the heroes in the war, always on the news," responded Mickey, then Andy nodded agreement. "What about her?" asked Mickey.

Mark was a little surprised that his friends hadn't remembered Hanna more readily. The death of one of the four heroes had been the only thing marring the success of this new age. Hanna had been not quite sixty, and apparently strong and sure of herself when she met her demise. Her death was a shock to the nation, for she had become an icon of the war which Earth had endured. The coroner concluded, judging by the severity of the trauma to her body, that Hanna had been in an intense fight for her life and lost. Speculation on the event had continued for years.

"Seems they finally figured out who killed her," Mark said. "Turns out it was a Lycan

named Mac, a war veteran. And now General Harris is calling once again for the destruction of all the Hyborgs and Lycans as a result."

"What? Wait, I thought he was the one in charge of creating the Hyborgs and Lycans in the first place," Mickey responded.

"He was," replied Mark, as he drew up a chair to slouch on. Reaching into a bowl on the coffee table, he pulled out a handful of potato chips and continued, "Guess he's afraid he'll be accused of creating monsters. So rather than accept responsibility, he's decided to end the program completely."

"Someone should really hold Harris responsible. This is just wrong," Mickey said in disgust. "I'm still not sure how that creep has escaped prosecution for so long. So many witnesses have come forward with evidence that he is a mass murderer."

"Seems someone in government has him fully protected," Andy said, as he too began to munch chips, ignoring the fact that the solid muscle he'd had in his prime was becoming soft and flabby.

"It's more than that," Mark said. "Seems he has ordered the Hyborgs themselves to remove the problem."

"What!" both Andy and Mickey exclaimed.

"He is having our war veterans kill off other war veterans?" Andy stammered in disbelief.

"Apparently so. But that's not the only news. Seems congress decided last week to put Harris on trial. And now the guy has disappeared. Poof, no trace anywhere," Mark said wearily. He was so disgusted with the whole affair that he felt helpless. "And there is a bigger debacle," he added.

Andy and Mickey were gazing at him, waiting to hear more.

"Seems he's also the guy who had the Mavens engineered. You remember, Andy, the ones who helped you and Lucy with research on plants in Dhuusamareeb before General Harris transferred them into the Revenge Program. The ones who stole the supply ship and disappeared shortly after that."

"So, have they put out an arrest warrant for Harris?" Mickey asked.

"Yup, system-wide, from what the news was reporting this morning. You two really should get out of this office more. Sitting here in the dark can't be good," Mark said, as he wiped the potato chip dust from his fingers onto his pants.

Andy laughed. "No way! We are clearly safer in here."



Four days previously, General Harris had entered the darkened room deep beneath his mansion in the hills outside New Denver. He sat at his desk and opened a small computer laptop which was connected directly with the private server the organization shared.

"It's done. I have sent the Hyborgs off world. And I've made sure that fool of a Danny Opinhimmer, and his band of misfits leading the world, are reliant on the information we feed them."

A voice on the computer screen replied, "En tack turelient, dell back engulf dorsal." The computer translator engaged and repeated, "Good, see you stay on track."

Harris rose from his desk and went over to a small bookshelf, where he picked up a small flat metal disk. An image of a woman appeared on the disk and Harris spoke to it. "The time is coming soon. Humanity is progressing to the point where their technology will be sufficient to provide what we need."

General Harris then put his escape plan into action; he had always had a plan ready. He was in his late eighties in his present incarnation and in excellent shape, though in terms of human time he had actually lived many, many thousands of years. Anyway, these days eighty was no longer old; often people lived to a hundred and thirty or beyond.

Harris had at his disposal, deep below his mansion, a small Gray escape ship. It was equipped with a blinding field which made it difficult to detect with electronics and impossible for the human eye to see. Now that the courts had put out a warrant for his arrest and his web of deceit could no longer be maintained, he stole away in the dark and made course for Neo Terra.

He took with him secrets that would never be revealed. One secret was the fact that he had created the Hyborgs quickly when the war with the aliens began because he'd been engineered by the Grays and knew what was coming. He had started building the Hyborg program long before the alien invasion started.

His small ship plied the distance to Neo Terra with no difficulty. Once there, he entered the planet undetected and found a small crevasse in the tunnel leading to the dock. He placed himself in stasis and set his clock for a wake-up call three hundred years into the future. Like a well-fed spider in the center of a new web, General Harris slept, waiting for the daylight to favor his return.



Pam turned on her tape recorder, adjusted the sound, and sat back to look around at the room full of dignitaries. The place was well-lit and boasted the latest technologies, some barely dreamed of when the war began. Yet she found it hard to believe it was already 2073 and the war had been over for forty years. In some ways, that hellish conflagration seemed like yesterday.

Danny Opinhimmer, world president, emerged from the wings in his wheelchair and came to the dais. He stood up, gripping the stand with both hands.

"To understand what happened in the past, it is sometimes necessary to know what transpired after," Danny said to the dignitaries gathered before him. "We often forget our true past, and then reinvent a false one in a vain attempt to disguise our own embarrassing behavior. But in time, the truth is always laid at our feet; we cannot hide from what we have become."

Danny's voice was cracked and worn, Pam thought. It was sad to see how old and tired he looked now. She remembered how strong he had appeared as the world's president after the invasion was over. But he'd had heavy burdens to bear these forty years, and he must find the bitterness he felt about the past hard to disguise.

Danny continued. "Yet again, you try to remove the stains of your ancestors. Yet again, you turn to your media gods to create the lies and half-truths you need to ease your consciences."

Pam could see the dignitaries squirming. But none of them had the audacity to voice an objection.

"I say this to you one last time. I was there. I remember what we did. I was the one who killed the last invader in space, and I've regretted it ever since. I remember how it attempted to communicate. I remember the last word it tried to say." The sorrow in Danny's voice and the deep scars across his face were brutal reminders of reality to the dignitaries honoring Danny's great deed on its fortieth anniversary, to yet again try to turn Danny and the others into shining heroes.

"The invader said, 'Why?' It said, 'why?'"

With that, Danny's old knees gave way, and he slumped back into the wheelchair. Without

another word, he left the podium and the public's view.

The dignitaries, as Pam had expected, blamed Danny's statements on old age and frailty. The videos that followed his speech were documentaries of how the evil invaders had had only one goal: world domination, which they'd nearly achieved. The videos showed that the combined fighting forces of good Earth people had defeated the cruel and oppressive empire that had spawned these aliens.

The footage of alien atrocities, matched with the footage of humans treating these invaders with dignity, only served to hide the true nature of war. The humans of Earth had been no better and no worse. They were merely the victors, and it was the duty of the media barons to capitalize on the heroic nature of the demoralized Earth people to rouse them to greater effort. To yet again send out wave after wave of media hype all over the solar system, blaming 'aliens' for every ill that Earth bore.

Pam could not take the hype any longer. She stood up, walked away from the table, and left the room. Later, she cursed herself for leaving when she did. She should have stayed longer, at least tried to prevent this propaganda from continuing to spew forth.

But one thing made her happy whenever she thought of it. General Harris had been branded a war criminal. He'd vanished and probably would never be punished, but at least all the world now knew what he was.

For a brief moment, her thin, delicate face stretched in a broad smile as she remembered the Pakistani diplomat trying to infer that the Indian government was somehow responsible for the death of so many people that first year of the war. A priceless moment! It had served the fools right for starting a pointless war just days before Earth was invaded. Photographs had shown the stunned looks on the faces of the Pakistani and Indian forces as the mother ships from space began attacking both forces.

Pam took the pins from her French roll and let down her long graying hair as she waited for the elevator to whisk her off to her room, and crossed her fingers that a good night's sleep would clear her head.

What was left of the world's population had started rebuilding in those areas not completely devastated by the alien onslaught, eventually dividing the remaining populations into ethnocentric groups, then even further by ideological beliefs. But what gave Pam the biggest headache were the yearly gatherings in the new United Nations building to commemorate valiant fallen soldiers and reaffirm the decision to eventually exterminate the Hyborgs, who had been created to win the war.

Reaching her room on the two hundredth floor, she entered a grand suite which had lavish refinements. This was the order of things now in New Denver, the new capital of old America. Reconstruction of the city had adopted a utopian design, as buildings now spanned entire city blocks and rose hundreds of stories into the air.

But, due to the depleted resources caused by war around the globe, gone were the SUV and hybrid automobiles, replaced with mass transit and three-wheeled bikes that ran on electric motors. The coffee shops on every corner served coffee substitute. Children had stopped attending schools, instead plugging into a global web that, in addition to writing, reading and arithmetic, taught all the propaganda that people needed to be passive.

Yes, Pam thought as she pulled the bed sheets up tight to her shoulders, the old ways were long gone now and maybe it was time to let the world be. The room, sensing her breathing slow down and the bed warming with her presence, automatically dimmed the lights throughout the suite and lowered the room's temperature. Despite her dark thoughts, sleep took her while she

wondered if she'd be able to speak with Danny in the morning.

But he had already died, a broken old man, with no hope of the truth about the so-called aliens ever winning out.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Danny's death that night shocked the world. Not only was he the first native Indian president, but his approval rating had never once dipped below eighty-nine percent, something absolutely unheard of in the history of presidents. The procession for his funeral put those of past emperors and kings to shame. The roads were lined with saddened people for hundreds of miles, as his motorcade passed on the way to the mausoleum which had been built especially for him.

Yes, Reader, it's sad that he had to die. But people died so quickly then.

I have more to tell you about Danny. The information came to light through a book that his son, James, wrote. James didn't want to succeed him in politics, but he did want Danny's life to be remembered for more than killing the leader of the invaders and becoming world president.

Danny had a journal, which he only ever shared with his son. His wife left shortly after giving birth to James, and Danny made every effort to ensure that his son never went without. The two would spend long nights out behind their modest home, which he refused to leave even when he became president. Danny and James camped out under the stars and burned a small fire on clear evenings, which annoyed the security team no end. There the two would read from Danny's journal, musing over events from times past.

James heard stories of Suzie, Beth and Bobby, Danny's old friends. When the Mahouds first attacked, Danny and these friends hid in a cave above some old mine shafts. But more importantly, James heard of the encounter his father had with a demon.

Danny had vivid memories of it because this event saved his life. Just as he was sliding down a side shaft in the mine, trying to escape the invader hunting for him, he witnessed a strange event just moments before he blacked out. Danny was sure the invader would kill him, for it was only a few feet from his body, its gold-colored faceted eyes gleaming, and gaining speed as he found himself falling backwards toward the shaft opening.

Then, as if from thin air, a demon exploded into the passageway in a flurry of noise and wind and dust, blocking the invader from reaching Danny as he thumped down on the bottom of the old shaft. He was just fading into unconsciousness when he saw the demon hit the invader square in the chest. The invader fell dead.

The demon was looking around the shaft, apparently confused, when it caught sight of Danny slumped on the floor. The huge beast bent down for a closer look, and the last thing Danny saw before he passed out was the demon's smile, revealing four gleaming white fangs below the blank white eyes.

That sounds like Charger? You're very observant, Reader.

Anyway, that was where the story ended for Danny, because when he came to, the demon was gone, and he was safe. He liked to tell James that it was a beast from native Indian traditions, something called a Wendigo. James always loved that story when he was little and, when he got older, often recounted the event when trying to save his family's traditions from disappearing.

Now you're confused? Yes, you're quite right, it couldn't have been Charger the Hyborg, because he wasn't yet in existence when Danny was in the cave. He was still an innocent young

man called Henry, working in a gas station.

I'll just finish James's story for you. He found a wife and they had a good life together; their daughter Suzie was named after Danny's first love. The family line endured through the Tasker war and the aliens' invasion of Earth, and fled to Ceres just before the Day of the Black Rain. Ceres was the one planet the Grays never attacked, which was always puzzling because they clearly knew of its existence. Most historians later theorized that the extreme cold and subterranean nature of the colony was what saved them.

I can see you're still thinking about Charger. Have you figured it out yet?

Of course! He was traveling through time, from far in the future, after he had been resurrected. That's what happened on Neo Terra, too, when the Mahouds were living in the hollow black planet. It was Charger R/T, ricocheting back and forth on the timeline, who exploded into their laboratory and killed one of the workers who tried to interfere with him.

No, not today. But I will tell you that whole story. Yes, and I'll tell you how time travel works, too.



Charger, banished to Mars and helping to open up settlements on the barren red planet, could still watch humanity. It happened, slowly at first, then faster. Humanity's need to feel safe meant that things of the past had to go. The Hyborgs and Lycans were monsters who had served a purpose, but now they were a drag on the world's economies.

So it was said.

Racism, prejudice, and phobias of the past ruled humanity as much as they ever had. A program had been set in motion to move the Hyborgs and their Lycans from Earth, which meant that at first, they would be employed in restoring Mars to a useful planet, but if killed or injured, they would not be repaired. Besides, it was reasoned, things that were so close to being dead could not have souls and should not be regarded as having the same significance as the living. General Harris's rants about these unholy demons of humanity's own creation remained legendary, in spite of the fact that he'd been the one to create them.

The Hyborgs had never represented a threat to humanity. Drawn largely from the downtrodden members of society, they tended to readily accept being commanded, which made them ideal soldiers. They were not so stupid, however, that they couldn't see what was happening to them.

It made sense for humans to use Hyborgs for work on Mars, for they didn't need much air or sleep to do what was needed in terraforming the planet. The new human society, the survivors of the war, experienced little in the way of crime, and wanted nothing to do with Hyborgs for fear of creating problems they hoped never to deal with. Everyone had a good-paying job, and it was common to see families with six or more children, all being supported by a society on the mend.

As people grew prosperous, the Hyborgs began to be seen as even more of a blight on humanity's rise to dominance once again. Sending them en masse to replenish Mars just made good economic and political sense. So, as humans came and went on the planet, the long-lived Hyborgs worked on, creating a subculture on Mars, one that had the potential to be violent, but was generally peaceful. This was a culture that Charger had been tasked with eliminating, a culture to be destroyed by one of their own.

He thought about the situation for long hours, becoming bitter as the years went by. He had been programmed to obey humans and, so far, had not been able to figure out how to break that

programming. Rejected by humanity and labeled a malediction by others of his own kind, he went on working, with Mac and Jill by his side, and sharing his thoughts only with them.



Jack, Beth and Henry's son, grew to be a strong and proud young man. He enjoyed life in the high North and was at peace with the lands. When Jack was twenty, he built a cabin thirty miles north of the village, married a young Inuit girl, and fathered two boys. The oldest boy found work in the new cities of Earth when he came of age, but the youngest, like his father, was in love with the high North, so he remained and worked in the new industries that were developed.

This youngest boy, Maxwell, also married an Inuit girl and they had a daughter. Named after her great grandmother, young Beth hated the North but grew to worship the stories told by her namesake. She learned of the adventures her great grandmother had while surviving the invasion, raising a family, being accepted by the Inuit and, eventually, becoming mayor of the village.

When Beth was very young, one Christmas her great grandmother gave her a necklace. "This is a special necklace, dear," Beth's great grandmother said in her old woman's voice as they sat together in the living room near the Christmas tree. "It was given to me by my first love. He was your great grandfather. He was a great man who fought for the freedom we have today. I never knew if he was killed in the war, or if he even survived the invasion, but I've always loved him."

Her great grandmother placed the necklace in Beth's hands. It was truly one of a kind. Henry had fashioned it himself, using various sized piston rings from different car motors, welding them together to create a representation of our solar system. On each of the nine rings, Henry welded a small, polished nut to represent a planet. For Earth, Henry welded a small steel ball with grooves to represent the planet's surface. At the heart of the solar system, the sun was represented by a large yellow diamond that had once belonged to his mother.

"His name was Henry, dear," Beth's great grandmother said. "He gave this to me with the promise that even the entire solar system would never be powerful enough to destroy his love for me." The necklace was not small or dainty, qualities a guy would never think necessary, but Beth's great grandmother had worn it from the day he had given it to her until now.

Because Beth's father and grandfather had married Inuit women, Beth looked Asian, except for her eyes. A genetic throwback to her great grandmother, she had ice-blue eyes, a color uncommon in ninety-nine percent of the world's population. She also had a taste for adventure. When Beth completed her university education, she decided that after the death of her great grandmother, she would travel to a place no one would have expected her to go. Beth chose Mars.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Well, Reader, at this point in time, Earth was enjoying a golden age. Although it celebrated the heroes of the past, the main thrust was for the future, for scientific progress.

What kind of progress? Oh, there were amazing innovations! Two of the greatest advances were using a galaxy to bend light to see stars in the distance, and bending light with gravity of our own design. Another stunning achievement was making a solar system into a gigantic telescope. And yet another was making world lasers powerful and refined enough to core deep

holes in distant planets to allow mining to take place. Sustainable stellar travel and quantum computers of immense power drove innovation and ecological sustainability to new and fantastic heights.

Settlements on Mars were being opened up. Moon was a space station. Neo Terra was thriving.

Yes, everybody was happy. Except for Charger and the other Hyborgs.

People were well-fed and industrious. Moral behavior improved as the threat of persecution was removed, and some of the less desirable traits of humanity seemed to dim. The few remaining religious groups were pitied for their backward beliefs and shunned, as science created great and wondrous new understandings. A brave new world shone, a world of a better human in a better place.

Advances in health care permitted longer lifespans and made for smarter humans. Because knowledge had expanded exponentially, schools all over the world increased schooling to grade fifteen, then college or university for an additional six years. So much had been learned in this time period that the average IQ had risen by several numbers. Humanity was healthier, smarter, safer, and better prepared for anything that the galaxy had to throw at them.

Or so they thought.

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GLOSSARY

Real world terms and definitions.

antigravity the antithesis of gravity; a hypothetical force by which a body of positive mass would repel a body of negative mass

Antikythera Mechanism 2,000-year-old astronomical calculator built by ancient Greeks

antimatter matter's twin, but with an opposite electric charge. When matter and antimatter meet, they annihilate each other, leaving nothing but energy behind. The big bang created equal amounts of the two, but today the observable universe is composed almost entirely of ordinary matter. This asymmetry is one of the greatest unsolved problems in physics. Antimatter is not the same as dark matter (see below).

Area 51 The US Air Force facility commonly known as Area 51 is a remote detachment of Edwards Air Force Base, within the Nevada Test and Training Range. The intense secrecy surrounding the base has made it the frequent subject of conspiracy theories and a central component to unidentified flying object (UFO) folklore.

BCE Before the Common Era. Now used in place of BC (Before Christ)

binary language the digital representation of speech

black hole a geometrically defined region of space-time exhibiting such strong gravitational effects that nothing—including particles and electromagnetic radiation such as light—can escape from inside it

bunker buster a bomb designed to penetrate targets buried deep underground

CE Common Era. Now used in place of AD ("Anno Domini" in Latin, or "the year of the Lord" in English)

cryo a combining form meaning "icy cold"

cyborg A cyborg (cybernetic organism) is a being with both organic and biomechatronic parts. The term cyborg is often applied to an organism that has restored function or enhanced abilities due to the integration of some artificial component or technology that relies on some sort of feedback.

dark matter a mysterious substance; its gravitational pull seems to hold galaxies together, like a massive skeleton, but we can't see it. We only know it's there from calculations of the speed at which galaxies move. The matter we know and understand accounts for just four per cent of the known universe; the rest is dark matter and dark energy.

Dhuusamareeb Dhusamareb in English, also spelled Dhusa Mareb, is the capital of the central Galguduud region of Somalia. It serves as the center of the Dhusamareb District.

dimensions Classical physics describes the first three basic dimensions as up/down, left/right, and forward/backward.

Enola Gay the Boeing B-29 Superfortress bomber which dropped the first atomic bomb.

FEMA Federal Emergency Management Agency.

fourth dimension The fourth dimension is time, which is not spatial, but a way of measuring physical change. We cannot move freely in time but must subjectively move in one direction.

Gobekli Tepe An archaeological site, regarded as of great importance, at the top of a mountain ridge in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey.

Goldilocks zone Also called the habitable zone or life zone, the Goldilocks region is an area of space in which a planet is just the right distance from its home star so that its surface is neither too hot nor too cold and liquid water remains on the surface of the planet without freezing or evaporating out into space.

hertz The hertz is defined as one cycle per second. One of its most common uses is the description of the sine wave, particularly those used in radio and audio applications, such as the frequency of musical tones. The unit is named for Heinrich Rudolf Hertz, who was the first to conclusively prove the existence of electromagnetic waves.

Higgs boson field (nicknamed the 'god particle') an invisible force field that stretches across the universe, encasing us like a Jell-O mold, and giving mass to elementary particles within it: the stuff that makes up stars, planets, trees, buildings, animals, and all of us. Without mass, electrons, protons, and neutrons wouldn't stick together to make atoms; atoms wouldn't make molecules; neither we nor our planet would exist.

hominid any of the modern or extinct bipedal primates of the family Hominidae. Used in the text as a term for naturally evolving humans.

hominoid same as above, but used in the text to refer to human lines altered by the alien Grays.

Kuiper Belt a disc-shaped region of icy objects beyond the orbit of Neptune – billions of kilometers from our sun. The Kuiper Belt and even more distant Oort Cloud are believed to be the home of comets that orbit our sun. The known icy worlds and comets in both regions are much smaller than Earth's moon.

LSD Lysergic acid diethylamide (acid) is a psychedelic drug, known for its psychological effects, which can include altered thinking processes, closed- and open-eye visuals, synesthesia, an altered sense of time and spiritual experiences. First synthesized from a chemical in ergot, a grain fungus that typically grows on rye.

Lycan A werewolf, also known as a lycanthrope (from the Greek) is a mythological or folkloric human with the ability to shapeshift into a wolf or hybrid wolf-like creature, either purposely or after being placed under a curse or affliction (e.g. via a bite or scratch from another werewolf).

MIT Massachusetts Institute of Technology

nanoparticles particles between 1 and 100 nanometers in size. Nanoparticle research is currently an area of intense scientific interest due to a wide variety of potential applications in biomedical, optical, and electronic fields.

plasma one of the four fundamental states of matter, the others being solid, liquid, and gas. A plasma is an ionized gas, into which sufficient energy is provided to free electrons from atoms or molecules and to allow both species, ions and electrons, to coexist. In industry, plasma torches are used to cut metals.

quantum entanglement In quantum physics, entangled particles remain connected so that actions performed on one affect the other, even when separated by great distances. The phenomenon so riled Albert Einstein that he called it "spooky action at a distance."

redshift In physics, redshift happens when light or other electromagnetic radiation from an object is increased in wavelength, or shifted to the red end of the spectrum.

R/T the performance marker used on Dodge automobiles since the 1960s. R/T stands for Road/Track. (See below for the definition used in the book.)

Shillelagh This particular type of alien fighting machine was named after the Ford MGM-51 Shillelagh, an American anti-tank guided missile designed to be launched from a conventional gun.

star-in-a-jar Nuclear fusion is nature's atomic power - it is what powers the sun and, if it can be made to happen on Earth on a large enough scale, promises to solve all of mankind's energy problems. It would be clean, last forever and create no long-term nuclear waste. One experimenter claims to have achieved it using simple sound waves. Sonoluminescence is a process that transforms sound waves into flashes of light, focusing the sound energy into a tiny flickering hot spot inside a bubble. This star-in-a-jar effortlessly reaches temperatures of tens of thousands of degrees, hotter than the surface of the sun.

supersymmetry In particle physics, supersymmetry is a proposed type of space-time symmetry that relates two basic classes of elementary particles: bosons, which have an integer-valued spin, and fermions, which have a half-integer spin.

telematics the branch of information technology that deals with the long-distance transmission of computerized information.

telomeres an essential part of human cells that affect how our cells age. Telomeres are the caps at the end of each strand of DNA that protect our chromosomes, like the plastic tips at the ends of shoelaces.

Tesla coil a form of induction coil for producing high-frequency alternating currents.

Titan the largest moon of Saturn. Thought to be a prebiotic environment rich in complex organic chemistry with a possible subsurface liquid ocean serving as a biotic environment.

Toba The Toba eruption occurred in Indonesia about 71,000 BCE. Its erupted mass was 100 times greater than that of the largest volcanic eruption in recent history. The eruption deposited an ash layer over the whole of South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian and South China Seas. This event may have caused a global volcanic winter of 6–10 years and possibly a 1,000-year-long cooling episode.

Ununseptium a super-heavy artificial chemical element with temporary symbol Uus and atomic number 117. It is the second-heaviest of all the elements that have been created so far and is the second-to-last element of the 7th period of the periodic table.

Wankel engine a type of internal combustion engine using an eccentric rotary design to convert pressure into rotating motion. Over the commonly used reciprocating piston designs the Wankel engine delivers advantages of: simplicity, smoothness, compactness, high revolutions per minute and a high power to weight ratio.

Wendigo a half-beast creature appearing in the legends of the Algonquian peoples along the Atlantic Coast and Great Lakes Region of both the United States and Canada.

Woodhenge a Neolithic henge and timber circle monument located in the Stonehenge World Heritage Site, 2 miles north-east of Stonehenge and just north of Amesbury.



Terms coined specifically for this book

blink system a technological triumph, it requires a massive system of orbital satellites, quantum computers and devices surgically attached to every human around the globe. Each device is numbered and cataloged, then integrated into a global network of systems and subsystems which any individual can access virtually. This allows a traveler to pick a destination and activate the transport, or the blink, which will remove him from his present location, then reassemble him instantly, molecule by molecule at the desired destination. Similar, in a way, to the 20th century telephone system. One can call up the address where one wishes to go, then be deconstructed, and reconstituted all in a blink.

Dinosauroids Troodon dinosaurs developed by the alien Grays into super-intelligent creatures meant to be servants

fifth dimension consists of the three dimensions all humans experience, plus time and space, coupled with an elevation to a higher plane of existence. A being in a fifth dimension could observe and interact with a being of the third or fourth, but the reverse is impossible. A quantifiable plane of existence where the observer experiences all the dimensions simultaneously, as if they are one.

First Ones a small group of humans were selected by the alien Grays for development into super-intelligent beings suitable as servants, called humanoids. Some of these escaped the Grays, developed a great empire, and evolved into the Age of Energy, where they discarded their physical bodies and became known as Enoch.

Hyborg a combination of hybrid and cyborg, applied to physically and mentally altered soldiers

Mahouds a branch of the First Ones which went off on their own and settled Atlantis

Mavens the name given to bright students whose DNA is manipulated in order to create highly intelligent experts in particular fields, who are intended to quickly find new ways to reclaim the planet after the Mahoud-Earth war.

Megiddo max Megiddo maximum security prison

R/T Resurrected terminus, or living dead

Taskers a class of robots built by the Mahouds

Taskoids Tasker robots which acquired the ability to make decisions

time-lock created by the alien Grays, this device isolates matter and energy from the normal flow of time

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Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover
Siamese Summers
Cat Under Cover
Cats & Crayons
Calico Cat Caper

The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay
Deep Water
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising
Red Blood Falling
Shockwave

A Clear Eye
Double Image
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest
Walking the Windsong
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

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## **Books Edited by Lea Tassie**

Charger the Soldier  
Charger the Weapon  
Charger the God  
The Missing Year

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About this book

In 2030, extraterrestrials attack Earth with poison mist and terrifying technology. Sacrificing his chance for a normal life, Henry is converted to a powerful super-soldier. He becomes Charger the Hyborg, twice as big, with metal armor as skin, artificial blood, four wicked fangs, and two genetically modified werewolves mind-linked to him. Frankenstein meets Dracula. Billions die, Earth becomes a burned-out ruin, and humans are grateful that Charger and the other Hyborgs are on their side.

Sweeping back 65 million years, the story revisits the moment when aliens first arrived on Earth, reveals potentially lethal secrets about the history of dinosaurs and humans, and visits ancient cities buried deep beneath Stonehenge and the African city of Dhuusamareeb.

While Charger struggles to accept his peacetime duties as a soldier, the ethics of doomsday are explored, along with the lengths man will go to in order to protect his home.

But that's only the beginning, because space-faring technology, and human nature will create many new challenges in the millennia to come.